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# Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research

SUSAN FOURNIER\*

Although the relationship metaphor dominates contemporary marketing thought and practice, surprisingly little empirical work has been conducted on relational phenomena in the consumer products domain, particularly at the level of the brand. In this article, the author: (1) argues for the validity of the relationship proposition in the consumer-brand context, including a debate as to the legitimacy of the brand as an active relationship partner and empirical support for the phenomenological significance of consumer-brand bonds; (2) provides a framework for characterizing and better understanding the types of relationships consumers form with brands; and (3) inducts from the data the concept of brand relationship quality, a diagnostic tool for conceptualizing and evaluating relationship strength. Three in-depth case studies inform this agenda, their interpretation guided by an integrative review of the literature on person-to-person relationships. Insights offered through application of inducted concepts to two relevant research domains—brand loyalty and brand personality—are advanced in closing. The exercise is intended to urge fellow researchers to refine, test, and augment the working hypotheses suggested herein and to progress toward these goals with confidence in the validity of the relationship premise at the level of consumers' lived experiences with their brands.

Relationship principles have virtually replaced short-term exchange notions in both marketing thought (Webster 1992) and practice (Peppers and Rogers 1993), precipitating what has been considered a paradigm shift for the field as a whole (Deighton 1996). Despite increased acceptance and relevance, it can be argued that the relationship perspective has been vastly underrealized in the marketing literature. The limited work that exists largely informs relationship marketing practice as opposed to the development of relationship marketing theory (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995). In a sense, the field has leapt ahead to application of relationship ideas and the assumption of relationship benefits without proper development of the core construct involved.

Particularly lacking are relationship-inspired studies in consumer as opposed to business markets, especially those concerning the consumer product domain (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995). Empirical research concerning relationships formed at the level of the brand has been especially scant. Understandably, relationship research

has focused on bona fide partnerships formed between persons, with the bulk of published studies concerning manufacturer-supplier and service-provider partnerships as a result (Berry 1983; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987).

The brand loyalty literature is perhaps most capable of informing theory concerning consumer-brand relationships. This research stream has stagnated of late, however (Lehmann 1996), with the majority of insights and contributions generated before the emergence of methods capable of truly informing the phenomenology of consumer-brand bonds (Sherry 1987). Although "loyalty" itself is a fertile relationship concept, its nuances have been lost in traditional brand loyalty research. Operationalizations relying on sequence or proportion of purchase perhaps better reflect a notion of inertia than loyalty with its full relational significance. Even well-intentioned attempts to consider loyalty as more than repeat purchase (Jacoby and Chestnut 1978) reduce the process to "narrowly cognitive utilitarian decision-making," thus failing to capture "the talismanic relationships consumers form with that which is consumed" (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, p. 31). Conceptualizing loyalty as a long-term, committed, and affect-laden partnership has also constrained relationship-inspired insight by implicitly encouraging ignorance of the many other potentially valuable relationship forms that may characterize consumer-brand bonds.

As a result, the basic questions of whether, why, and in what forms consumers seek and value ongoing relationships with brands remain largely unanswered (Webster

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1992). Valuable exceptions exist (see, e.g., Blackston 1993; McCracken 1993; Olsen 1993, 1995; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), yet existing work stops short of developing a grounded and fully articulated relationship-based framework for the study of consumer-brand interactions. The interpersonal relationships literature capable of informing this task has been scarcely used in the consumer behavior field. While a significant literature on people and their special possessions has evolved (Ahuvia 1993; Belk 1988; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Richins 1994; Walendorf and Arnould 1988), this work concerns relationship theory only indirectly, if at all. Construct labels are borrowed from the relationship paradigm without explicit consideration of interpersonal theory to develop those constructs (see, e.g., Ball and Tasaki [1992] and Kleine, Kleine, and Allen [1995] on attachment). Others capitalize upon fundamental relationship tenets without explicit development of theoretic relationship implications *per se* (e.g., Blackston's [1993] treatment of the brand as relationship partner). Researchers who have applied interpersonal relationship theories to the study of consumer-object interactions have been highly selective in their treatments. Theories of love (Shimp and Madden 1988), commitment (Dick 1988), and trust (Hess 1995) receive the bulk of researchers' attention to the exclusion of other important relationship constructs. None have yet offered a comprehensive relationship-oriented view of consumer-brand interactions—one that starts with basic relationship principles and builds an integrative framework to explain and explore the form and dynamics of those interactions in everyday life.

The present article provides a framework for better understanding the relationships consumers form with the brands they know and use. The intent of the exercise is to develop a solid conceptual foundation from which brand relationship theory can be cultivated and to illustrate portions of this framework as a way of demonstrating utility of the consumer-brand relationship idea as a whole. Toward this end, the author argues that (1) brands can and do serve as viable relationship partners; (2) consumer-brand relationships are valid at the level of lived experience; and (3) consumer-brand relationships can be specified in many ways using a rich conceptual vocabulary that is both theoretically and managerially useful. Collectively, the arguments support the potential of theoretically sound relationship applications in the brand context. The thick descriptions contained herein yield insight not only into theories of symbolic consumption but into those of brand loyalty and brand personality as well, generating many productive avenues for future research. The exercise is intended to urge fellow researchers to refine, test, and augment the relationship-inspired working hypotheses (Guba 1981) presented herein and to progress toward these goals with confidence in the validity of the relationship premise in the consumer-brand domain.

True to its discovery-oriented task (Wells 1993), the investigation is exploratory and descriptive in flavor.

Three purposively selected case studies inform the research agenda. Four core conditions that qualify relationships in the interpersonal domain (Hinde 1995) serve as broadly construed, *a priori* themes by which the study is designed, analysis is guided, and arguments are structured: (1) relationships involve reciprocal exchange between active and interdependent relationship partners; (2) relationships are purposive, involving at their core the provision of meanings to the persons who engage them; (3) relationships are multiplex phenomena: they range across several dimensions and take many forms, providing a range of possible benefits for their participants; and (4) relationships are process phenomena: they evolve and change over a series of interactions and in response to fluctuations in the contextual environment.

The sections below provide a selective review of the literature that informs the *a priori* themes of reciprocity, meaning provision, multiplicity, and temporality. First, theories of animism and impression formation are marshaled in support of an argument for the brand as a reciprocating relationship partner. This argument is instrumental to the article: it grants license to pursue the relationship proposition to its fullest conclusion and provides an anchor around which a framework relationship strength is later structured. The literature review for conditions 2–4 exposes the reader to important relational concepts and propositions, grounding study design and analysis procedures. Case stories are analyzed around these central tenets, the exposition of which reveals the phenomenology of relationships in the consumer-brand domain.

## CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

### The Brand as Relationship Partner

For a relationship to truly exist, interdependence between partners must be evident: that is, the partners must collectively affect, define, and redefine the relationship (Hinde 1979). The premise that consumer actions affect relationship form and dynamics is easily accepted. Comfort in thinking about the brand not as a passive object of marketing transactions but as an active, contributing member of the relationship dyad is a matter more deserving of note.

One way to legitimize the brand-as-partner is to highlight ways in which brands are animated, humanized, or somehow personalized. The human activity of anthropomorphizing inanimate objects has been identified as a universal in virtually all societies (Brown 1991). Theories of animism (Gilmore 1919; McDougall 1911; Nida and Smalley 1959; Tylor 1874) suggest that there exists a felt need to anthropomorphize objects in order to facilitate interactions with the nonmaterial world. Consumers show no difficulty in consistently assigning personality qualities to inanimate brand objects (Aaker 1997), in thinking about brands as if they were human characters (Levy 1985; Plummer 1985), or in assuming the perspective of the brand in order to articulate their own relationship

views (Blackston 1993). Consumers' acceptance of advertisers' attempts to humanize brands and their tendencies to animate products of their own accord suggest a willingness to entertain brands as vital members of the relationship dyad.

Theories of animism provide insight into the specific ways in which the vitality of the brand can be realized in the relationship. Three process mechanisms are implied in these earlier writings, each varying in the degree to which the human condition is approximated. The first animistic form involves instances in which the brand is somehow possessed by the spirit of a past or present other. The use of spokespeople in advertising (e.g., Bill Cosby for Jell-O) qualifies here as an example. Spokespersons may have personalities that so strongly fit those of the brands they advertise that the brand, in a sense, becomes the spokesperson with repeated association over time. McCracken's (1989) idea that spokespersons are effective because they deliver the spirit of the endorser through product usage reflects this theory. Brand-person associations of a more personal nature are also common. A brand of air freshener that grandmother kept in her bathroom, a floor cleaner that an ex-husband always used—these brands can become so strongly associated with the past—other that the person's spirit comes to dwell in the brand and is evoked reliably with each use. Brands originally received as gifts (McGrath and Sherry 1993) are likely infused with the spirit of the giver as well, with these person associations again serving to animate the brand as a vital entity in the consumer's mind.

Another form of animism involves complete anthropomorphization of the brand object itself, with transference of the human qualities of emotionality, thought, and volition. Anthropomorphized brand characters serve as examples. Charlie the Tuna and the Pillsbury Doughboy are identifiable characters endowed with the capacity to laugh, joke, scheme, and conspire. In a variation on this animistic form, limited human qualities are attributed to the brand, though the brand itself is not enlivened as a thinking, feeling entity. Research on person-object relations reveals that people assign selective human properties to a range of consumer goods (Belk 1988; Rook 1985, 1987), most notable among them tools, food, drink, clothing, weaponry (Gilmore 1919), and household technologies (Mick and Fournier 1998).

For the brand to serve as legitimate relationship partner, it must surpass the personification qualification and actually behave as an active, contributing member of the dyad. Marketing actions conducted under the rubric of interactive and addressable communications qualify the brand as a reciprocating partner. Animated brand characters also satisfy the activity criterion through their performances. It is argued, however, that the brand need not engage these blatant strategies to qualify as active relationship partner. At a broad level of abstraction, the everyday execution of marketing plans and tactics can be construed as behaviors performed by the brand acting in its relationship role. Research on impression formation (Srull and

Wyer 1989) suggests that all observed behaviors are translated into trait language and that these traits form the basis for the evaluative concept of the person. Olson and Allen (1995) applied this theory to explain how brand personality develops from the actions of brand characters in advertising. A logical extension of this thinking is to view all marketing actions as a set of behavioral incidents from which trait inferences about the brand are made and through which the brand's personality is actualized. This important conceptual point—that the everyday execution of marketing mix decisions constitutes a set of behaviors enacted on behalf of the brand—forms a cornerstone of the relationship argument. With a focus on brand behavior, one can articulate a theory of how the brand relationship role is constructed and begin to see ways in which the brand, acting as an enlivened partner in the relationship, contributes to the initiation, maintenance, and destruction of consumer-brand relationship bonds.

Undoubtedly, there exists a lack of parallelism in applying the reciprocity criterion to an inanimate brand object. A brand may enjoy selected animistic properties, but it is not a vital entity. In fact, the brand has no objective existence at all: it is simply a collection of perceptions held in the mind of the consumer. The brand cannot act or think or feel—except through the activities of the manager that administers it. In accepting the behavioral significance of marketing actions, one accepts the legitimacy of the brand as contributing relationship partner. A weaker form of the argument draws comparisons between consumer-brand relationships and human relationships involving partners that lack tangible vitality or mortal status (see, e.g., Caughey [1984] on relationships between fans and movie stars; Buber [1946] on relationships with God or mortal status; Hirschman [1994] on people's relationships with pets). These works lend credibility to the idea of extending the partnership analogue into the brand domain as well.

## Relationships: Providing Meanings in Psycho-Socio-Cultural Context

At their core, relationships are purposive: they add and structure meanings in a person's life (Berscheid and Peplau 1983; Hinde 1995). The development of personality depends in large part on relationships forged with others (Kelley 1986). Meaningful relationships can change self-concept through expansion into new domains (Aron and Aron 1996) or reinforce self-concept through mechanisms of self-worth and self-esteem (Aron, Paris, and Aron 1995). This meaning-provision notion is accepted by consumer researchers who study possessions and their broad consequences for self-definition (Belk 1988; Holt 1995; Kleine et al. 1995; McCracken 1988; Richins 1994; Sirgy 1982; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988).

Since the relationship is, in essence, what the relationship means, understanding a given relationship requires a mastery of the meanings the relationship provides to the person who engages it. Three important sources of

meaning—the psychological, the sociocultural, and the relational—are identified, each serving as a context that shapes the significance of the relationship for the person involved. Relationships both affect, and are affected by, the contexts in which they are embedded.

A fruitful way to map the psychological context of a given relationship is to specify the identity activity in which the relationship is grounded. Considering the work of Mick and Buhl (1992) and others (Cantor and Zirkel 1990), three central connection points in a goal-based personality framework can be specified. First, relationships may help resolve life themes—profound existential concerns or tensions that individuals address in daily life (Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie 1979). Though they may operate below the level of conscious awareness, life themes are deeply rooted in personal history and are thus highly central to one's core concept of self. A relationship may also deliver on important life projects or tasks (Cantor et al. 1987; Caspi 1987; Erikson 1950). Life projects involve the construction, maintenance, and dissolution of key life roles that significantly alter one's concept of self, as with role-changing events (e.g., college graduation), age-graded undertakings (e.g., retirement), or stage transitions (e.g., midlife crisis). Most concrete and temporally bounded are relationships rooted in current concerns, a series of discrete, interrelated activities directed toward completion of daily tasks (Klinger 1987; Little 1989). It is easy to conjecture how relationships can connect at different levels of the goal hierarchy: a parent-child relation may help resolve an existential life theme of marginality versus significance, for example, while a functional relationship with one's day-care provider may service a career project or current concern. It is important to note that relationships may add significant meanings to the lives of the persons who engage them at each level or depth of the operative goal connection.

Prior research highlights five broad sociocultural contexts circumscribing relationship attitudes and behaviors: age/cohort, life cycle, gender, family/social network, and culture (Dion and Dion 1996; Gilligan, Lyons, and Hanmer 1990; Levinger 1995; Milardo and Wellman 1992; Stueve and Gerson 1977). These factors systematically influence the strength of relationship drives, the types of relationships desired, the nature and experience of emotional expression in relationships, styles of interacting within relationships, the ease with which relationships are initiated and terminated and the degree to which enduring commitments are sought. The importance of sociocultural context is mirrored in consumer research concerning the socially embedded character of consumption meanings and preferences (Holbrook 1993; Holt 1997; Olsen 1995; Sherry 1991; Thompson 1996).

In thinking about the significance of an individual relationship it is also important to consider the networked nature of the phenomenon. Relationships exist within the context of other relationships (Parks and Eggert 1991). The idea that the meaning of a given relationship is inextricably entwined with other relationships in the portfolio

is echoed in consumer research concerning the complementarity of consumption constellations (McCracken 1988; Solomon and Assael 1988) and the cultural meaning of “brandscape” in materialist society (Sherry 1987).

## Relationships as Multiplex Phenomena

Relationship research must be acutely sensitive to variations in form (Berscheid and Peplau 1983). The distinctions between relationship classes in the interpersonal sphere are so profound that specialists dedicated to the study of specific relationship types have emerged (e.g., Hayes [1988] on friendship and Kelley et al. [1983] on close relationships). Some have found it useful to collapse across forms to study core relationship dimensions. Relationships are frequently distinguished by the nature of the benefits they furnish to their participants (Weiss 1974; Wright 1974). Socioemotional provisions include psychosocial identity functions (e.g., reassurance of self-worth, announcement of image, and social integration) as well as the rewards of stimulation, security, guidance, nurturance, assistance, and social support; instrumental provisions are functionally tied to the attainment of objective, short-term goals. Relationships are also distinguished by the types of bonds that join parties together. These may be substantively grounded (as with task, obligation, or investment bonds) or emotionally based, the latter ranging in intensity from superficial affect to simple liking, friendly affection, passionate love, and addictive obsession (Fehr and Russell 1991; Sternberg 1986). Other dominant relationship dimensions include kin (non-voluntary) versus nonkin (voluntary), formal (role-related) versus informal, equal versus unequal, and friendly versus hostile (Wish, Deutsch, and Kaplan 1976).

## Relationships in Dynamic Perspective

Temporality distinguishes the relationship from the isolated transaction (Berscheid and Peplau 1983). Relationships are constituted of a series of repeated exchanges between two parties known to each other; they evolve in response to these interactions and to fluctuations in the contextual environment. For purposes of study, researchers generally decompose the continuous process of relationship development into manageable growth segments. Most adopt a five-phased model of initiation, growth, maintenance, deterioration, and dissolution (Levinger 1983), wherein each stage is one interval in a sequence of changes in type (e.g., evolution from friends to lovers) or level of intensity (e.g., an increase or decrease in emotional involvement). Theories differ in the number of stages that are posited, the nature of the processes presumed critical for development at each stage (e.g., intimacy, love, commitment, trust, behavioral interdependence, self-other integration), and the mechanisms governing transitions between stages (e.g., novelty and



arousal, comparison versus available alternatives, stress accumulation).

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Design and Data Collection

Discovery-oriented project goals dictated the use of phenomenological interviewing (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989) over more structured approaches to inquiry. By permitting an understanding of the subjective meanings of consumers' lived experiences with brands, the technique was also better suited to the task of establishing consumer validity of the brand relationship proposition as a whole. Modified life-history case studies (Denzin 1978) were conducted for three women in different life situations, two of these involving stage-related transitions: Jean, a 59-year-old barmaid living with her husband; Karen, a recently divorced 39-year-old working mother of two; and Vicki, a 23-year-old graduate student in her final year of study at a major university. Informants were interviewed for a total of 12–15 hours each in a series of four to five in-home interviews conducted over a three-month period. Informants received specially tailored gifts valued at \$100 in exchange for their participation.

Informants were purposively selected to maximize chances of uncovering insight on important brand relationship phenomena, a legitimate goal in this foundational research phase (Erlandson et al. 1993). The gender qualification recognized previous research suggesting that women exhibit more and stronger interpersonal relationships and brand involvements (Guest 1964; Sherrod 1989). Variations in age/cohort and life cycle allowed attention to sociocultural factors driving relationship behaviors in both interpersonal and consumer behavior domains. Transitional cases permitted analysis of brand behaviors in periods of heightened identity negotiation (Schouten 1991) and relationship development activity (Andreasen 1984; Stueve and Gerson 1977). Size restrictions on the informant pool ensured the depth concerning life worlds and brand relationship portfolios necessary for thick description (Erlandson et al. 1993; Mick and Buhl 1992). All interviews and analyses were conducted by the author to permit the holistic perspective sought through the method.

Interviews were designed to yield two complementary types of information: (1) a first-person description of the informant's brand usage history and (2) contextual details concerning the informant's life world. Stories describing the genesis, evolution, and usage of brands in the informant's repertoire were elicited. Brands in this study included packaged goods as well as durables, semidurables, and services, each discussed as informants saw fit and as time allowed. To stimulate discussion, kitchen cabinets were opened and informants were instructed to "tell the story" behind any brand in the inventory. The remaining course of the interview was set by informants. Specific

relationship concepts were not prompted, and an explicit attempt at avoiding relationship references in probes was made. In the tradition of emergent design (Erlandson et al. 1993) visual tools including developmental time lines and dimensional maps were included as ad hoc discussion aids to clarify temporal and meaning-based aspects of chosen brand relationships. Life-history information was gathered from a closing interview session and a follow-up survey focusing on major life experiences, core decisions, and key transition points in informants' lives (Tagg 1985).

### Data Analysis

Understanding brand relationships at the level of felt experience required two types of interpretation of the verbatim transcripts, both following the general procedures of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Idiographic analysis (Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990; Thompson et al. 1994) started with an impressionistic reading of transcripts and identification of recurrent behavioral and psychological tendencies manifest therein. Identity issues were summarized within the framework of life themes, projects, and concerns described earlier. Brand stories were then considered individually and collectively for their manifestation of personality themes such that a holistic understanding of brand relationships within the context of the consumer emerged. The second level of interpretation involved across-person analysis, the goal of which was to discover patterns across brand episodes and individuals that could help structure an understanding of consumer-brand relationship phenomena. Collectively, informants generated 112 brand stories for analysis. Theoretical properties of the brand relationships represented in these stories were identified through the constant comparative method using axial and selective coding procedures (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The analyst sought an understanding of the range of types in the relationship category, the processes by which relationships developed over time, the conditions under which relational phenomena were pronounced or minimized, and the major consequences of relationship engagement, especially those concerning other noteworthy brand phenomena (e.g., satisfaction and loyalty). As per the foregoing literature review, a priori codes included dimensionality (voluntary vs. imposed, friendly vs. hostile, intense vs. superficial, equal vs. unequal), affective character (strength, direction, and type of tie), relationship provisions (socioemotional vs. functional rewards), and stage of relationship development (initiation, growth, maintenance, decline). Basic relationship descriptors were also coded (e.g., relationship duration, frequency of interaction, category exclusivity, initiation source), and consumers' use of interpersonal relationship analogues was noted. Coding schemes were modified as analysis progressed and new concepts were uncovered. In both the idiographic and across-person analyses, the focus was on relationships formed with specific brands as opposed to

product categories, as identified through evidence of meaning transfer to the level of the brand (McCracken 1993).

### Issues of Trustworthiness

Several techniques were employed to elevate the trustworthiness of this inquiry (Erlandson et al. 1993). Member checks gauged the credibility of the author's interpretive claims against the views of those sharing their stories. Three colleagues reviewed interview transcripts and interpretive summaries in a peer debriefing process. These procedures caused reanalysis of the data on several occasions toward the goals of mutual comfort, objectivity, and recognizability in interpretation. Triangulation of multiple stories from the same person, of interviews conducted with the same persons at multiple points in time, of concepts reflected in alternate brand stories, and of information from multiple data sources (e.g., grocery lists, shelf contents, stories of other household members) also lent confidence to the credibility of results. Purposive sampling of informants possessing distinctly different experiences and understandings of the phenomena of interest allows for transferability judgments of the insights obtained, as does the thick description offered herein.

### IDIOPGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Informant interviews are interpreted below, first in terms of the personal and sociocultural contexts defining each informant's life world, then in terms of the brand relationships collectively occupying that world. Especially meaningful brand relationships are highlighted, and threads tying those relations together are identified. An attempt to link the person's overall brand relationship portfolio to identity issues salient at the time of interviewing is made such that a coherent picture of the role of brand relationships in the consumer's life world emerges. Descriptive analyses of relational phenomena are seeded throughout these stories for development in the later section on cross-case findings.

#### Case I: Jean

*Jean's Life Story.* Jean is 59 years old. She lives with her husband of 40 years in a middle-class suburb of a northeastern city not 10 miles from the town in which both she and he (and their mothers and fathers before them) were born. Jean and Henry reluctantly moved "way out in the country" back in 1963 so that Henry would have a shorter commute to his manufacturing job. While Henry will soon retire from this job after 40 years, Jean still works—60 hours and six days a week—tending a small neighborhood bar in her blue-collar hometown. Jean has had this job for 13 years. She likes keeping a "base" in the town where all of her brothers and most of her nieces and nephews still live. Before the present job, Jean worked as a waitress at an ethnic social club down the

street from her present establishment, serving food and drink to "the locals" as they played cards and celebrated their birthdays and weddings. Jean worked only weekend nights during the 20-some-odd years she was with the social club. She thought it important to be home to raise her girls, aged 30 (Lizzie), 35 (Linda), and 40 (Laurie), now "scattered all across the country."

Jean grew up in the house her Italian grandfather built. He carefully crafted the inlaid wood floors, constructed the masonry walls and fireplaces, and painted dogwood blossoms across the dining and living room ceilings. Jean was born in this house, as was her mother before her. It is the house her brother, his wife, and two of their three grown children now occupy. The house is a symbol of all Jean believes in: it is at once family, independence, and hard work. Jean gave 10 years of her life to the consuming care of her critically ill mother so that the nursing home would not take this house, her mother's only asset. Jean's sacrifices paid off: when her mother died and appointed her executrix of the will, Jean signed the house over to her brother. Over the last three years, Jean depleted her "entire life savings" covering his mortgage payments so he would not lose the house to the bank ("His credit's so bad, he could only get a short-term 18 percent builder's loan. It's real tough for him to come up with the money.'). She would give more if she had it: "After how hard I worked for that house, I can't let him lose it now."

Jean lived with her mother, stepfather, and three half brothers until the age of 19 when she married her high school sweetheart in the Catholic church across the street. A strong believer in God ("I pray everyday") and his protection of those who "sacrifice and work hard," Jean is no longer a practicing Catholic. Barred over 30 years ago for confessing the use of birth control to her priest ("We could not afford another baby. . . . We had nothing . . . Henry was only making \$40 a week"), Jean never approached the church for reconsideration. Honesty and integrity are very important to her: "They wouldn't let me stay, but they forgive people for adultery? I can't have communion but they can? That's not right. I could go back now, I guess, but I don't. I believe in God my way."

Jean "didn't grow up with very much," both in the way of money or family support. The illegitimate child of a father she would never know, Jean was somewhat an outsider in her own home. Many aunts and uncles were against her remaining in the family at all, pleading unsuccessfully with Jean's mom and grandmother to put her up for adoption. This battle for acceptance got tougher with the sudden death of her grandmother at age 50. But Jean soon discovered that superior performance of household tasks offered a surefire mechanism through which she could fit in with her family and garner their support.

I think my mom treated me that way because I stood for what she would never have. She was so beautiful. The party girl. Look at this picture: the Gibson girl. When she got pregnant she was sent away for awhile and everything

changed. She married Frankie; I don't know if anyone else would have her. She never loved him. And, he never really cared for me because I was not his. So, I spent most of my time doing things for him and her, cleaning the house, taking care of them, my brothers, because at least that was something that I really knew how to do right.

Such was born the purpose that would organize the rest of Jean's life: resolution of a central life theme of marginality versus significance through successful performance of the traditional gendered tasks of mother and wife. To this day, Jean wants desperately to be affirmed by society in these, the roles she values most. Accomplishment as a cook and housekeeper remain a major source of happiness, pride, and satisfaction in Jean's life.

What do I do everyday? I cook. I clean. My white clothes are white. You can pick up a sheet of mine that is 10 years old and people think they are brand new. I iron them. I don't dry them. I never dry my sheets. Never. To me, they are rags when you do that. "Why do you do that," people say, "You're weird." Because I like to sleep on a sheet that is ironed. That's my preference. I've always done it. Like Lizzie will say, "Mom, you don't have to iron my sheets when I bring them over to do the laundry." But Allan (her husband) goes, "Oh, your mother did the sheets, huh?" So, it must make a difference. Everybody always says what a beautiful house I have. That makes me feel good.

Jean's tough childhood taught her a lot of lessons. She learned that if you want something, you do it yourself "cause nobody is gonna do it for you." With no more than a high school education, Jean discovered the value of diligence and hard work. She lives by one of her mother's credos: "You want, you work, you get." These beliefs keep Jean from retiring despite her husband's urgings: "If I retire, he'll give me five bucks a week. Forget that! I want my own money so I can do. Do what I want to do." Jean's self-appointed "theme song," "She Works Hard for the Money" by Donna Summer, captures her feelings: "She works hard for the money; So hard for the money. She works hard for the money but they never treat her right."

Jean's attitudes toward work are deeply utilitarian. She learned the powerful enabling capabilities of money and the way it helps remove vulnerabilities. Jean reflects upon the possessions she has acquired as tangible evidence of her sacrifices and hard work. These possessions demonstrate that one can indeed rise above circumstances and "be somebody."

Why do I like this house so much? I like to see my things that I like, that I worked so hard for. Makes me feel good. Look at Henry's brother David. He never did anything with his life. Nothing! Fifty years old and he doesn't even own a house. The only thing he's got is an apartment because his brother lets him live there, a car because his mother gave it to him, and a job because his brother owns the place. Everybody always says, "Oh, poor David." Bullshit. He has nothing because he does nothing. Period. These people spend their money on drinking and scratch cards and they

have nothing to show for it. Well, I do. I have all these nice things.

Jean is a second-generation Italian from a town where over half the people are Italian. For years, Jean limited the expression of her ethnic identity to negotiate her marriage "across the tracks" to a boy whose mother not only hated "Guineas," but warned that if he married one, "his kitchen would smell like garlic all the time." Although Jean still "doesn't allow garlic in her house" ("It makes me sick . . . just the smell of it"), she has recently taken to speaking Italian with the old men in the bar. She even talks of visiting Italy someday, a big step for someone who has only twice been on a plane. It is with Italians that Jean finds much-needed comfort and acceptance.

I like to be Italian. Italians are nice, friendly people. If I ever get the chance to travel—and I hate to go anywhere—I'd like to go to Italy. I think I would feel really comfortable there. Italians care about people. About family. . . . Not that I am just for Italian people, but. . . . Take Henry's family. They don't give a shit about anybody. Somebody dies there and they are gone. He used to say, "Well, somebody dies in your family and they get professional mourners!" In his family, someone dies and they have a party! I'll never forget the first time I went to a wake in his family. Nobody even cared. It was . . . a different feeling. . . . Italian people miss you when you are gone. They are closer, I think.

Jean's love of Italians also stems from their mutual love of the concept of family, broadly construed. The celebration of personal relationships organizes much of Jean's life. Sundays are reserved for informal dinners among extended family members. Saturdays are spent caring for her nephew's three-year-old ("the family's only baby"). Weeknights after work often include "a quick trip to her brother's on the way home." But every day in the bar, Jean is part of a "family" as well. Jean is a member of a closely knit community where everyone has intimate knowledge of the other. All members of the community are observers and participants in a vibrant network that ties them to a common heritage and binds them to a future that will be shared by all. Through her work as barmaid, Jean has found not only legitimacy through financial security, but also the affiliative meanings her life lacked as a youth.

I like this town. I know everybody; the cops, the firemen, their kids. I know what is going on, who lives in whose house, who is having a baby, who is screwing who. I know everybody that comes into the bar. Their parents. Their kids. I like that. And the customers like that too. I always ask them, "How is your mother doing? How is your job? Did you make out all right at the doctors?" I treat the customers like people and they know I am interested in them and their problems. The other bartender just gives them a drink and never says anything to them. They don't like that.

Within this social structure, Jean is expected to be loyal and to share resources that become available. These are



requirements she fulfills all too well. Jean will leave her mark on the world by being thought of and felt in the lives of those she has touched and helped. Compassion and sacrifice: this is the stuff Jean is made of.

I can't tell you how many people owe me money. *Lots* of money. Some I'll probably never see again. But that's okay. I want to give it to them. I like to share. If you want it, I've got it. If I can give it to you, I will. If I can help you, I will. I don't do it for people to like me because I don't care one way or the other. I don't give a shit. I do it because I can. No matter what it is, I will always offer it. People say I give away everything. I don't care. I will give anything I have to someone to help them out. Money, food, whatever.

Jean's group connectedness is a source of both joy and anxiety. Strong connections within the network subject her to peer approval, normative expectations, and reciprocity demands. Jean is sometimes torn between following tradition ("They say that you are supposed to . . .") and asserting her personal freedom ("I am my own person. I like what I like. I don't do something just because somebody else does."). Jean struggles to rise above the meaninglessness that characterizes many lives at the bar ("They're all on unemployment, collecting from the government one way or another. They drink and gamble away everything") while at the same time remaining connected to the people she knows and loves. In response, Jean creates a private self, sheltering sacred experiences that are uniquely hers. Quietly, Jean accommodates the sometimes contradictory ideas and false expectations that others impose on her as she battles to resolve her secondary life theme of affiliation versus independence.

I love jewelry. I have lots of nice jewelry. But I don't wear it to the bar. No way! They all get so jealous, so I just don't wear it. Henry gave me a fur coat and I never wear that there either. They make me laugh. They think I'm rich because I am always giving everybody everything and 'cause our house is so nice. But I wear stuff off the mark-down rack! Hand-me-downs! That's all right. Let them think that. I don't care.

Jean's daily life enjoys little variation on a theme: she cleans, works, plays cribbage and dominoes, and listens to and passes on the tales of others. She lives and will likely die within a few miles of where her mother lived and died, and her mother before her. She knows of and about everyone that makes up her life world. This grounding lends a sense of predictability, security, and constancy to Jean's life. It provides her with balance in a world that is constantly evolving. This suggests Jean's third life theme of stability versus change.

I don't like to make changes! I am happy being the way I am. I have lived in this house for 33 years, and I want to stay here after I retire. I work where I grew up and I know everybody there. I don't want to go somewhere where I don't know anybody. Everybody keeps asking me, "What are you gonna do when you retire? Go to Florida?" The hell with that! I wanna live here! I'm *doing* what I want to do! I like my house. I wanna stay here! I just like. . . . I am comfortable, I guess.

*Jean's Brand Relationship Portfolio.* Jean's life themes of marginality/significance, affiliation/independence, and stability/change are clearly reflected in her brand behaviors. These themes suggest product categories in which relationships are likely to develop, influence the depth and breadth of chosen brand attachments, and define the criteria by which relationships are maintained. While Jean's identity themes organize her brand portfolio, that portfolio in turn helps her negotiate life themes toward a concept of self that is both valid and rewarding.

Jean's brand relationship portfolio is best distinguished by the sheer number of close relationships in it and the enduring nature of her attachments. It was hard to identify brands in Jean's repertoire that were *not* specified as deeply held commitments, many of which have survived for decades. Jean's most powerful brand attachments appear in food categories connected to her core identity as Italian wife and mother. Spaghetti sauce provides an excellent case in point. This direct extension of Jean's concept of self (Belk 1988) provides tangible evidence of ethnic heritage and a stream of compliments to assuage a challenged sense of worth.

My mother always used to make the sauce too. All Italians do. When you make sauce, it's like your trademark. (My youngest brother) Johnny always says that he can tell people by the sauce that they make. Everybody loves my sauce. My brother Frankie used to sit with a bowl of just my sauce and eat it like soup. He says I make the best sauce he ever had, and he is a gourmet. Goes to a lot of nice restaurants. His ex-wife always cooked really fancy suppers.

Jean exhibits especially strong relationships with all of the brands that enable her "trademark." Loyalties to Pastene tomatoes, Hunt's Sauce, Bertolli Olive Oil, Contadina tomato paste, Progresso bread crumbs, and even the Revere Ware pan she uses to cook stand strong in intensely competitive environments. Jean's highly scripted sauce-making ritual provides continual reinforcement of the brand meanings that empower the enactment of her core identity.

When I make the sauce, it takes all day. I let it cook on the stove for 8 hours. I have a really big pot. Stainless steel from Revere Ware. 12 quarts. The best pot I ever had. I bought one for my daughter too. The sauce doesn't burn in it and stick to the bottom like it used to with my old one. Anyway, like I told you, I blend the Pastene tomatoes in the blender. Whole tomatoes. "Kitchen Ready" it says on the can. Now I use three at least, maybe four cans usually. And I add a little can of the Hunts special sauce. Not much, just the little can. Then I fry up the sausage in a frying pan with the Bertolli olive oil and a little bit of onion, pepper. And sometimes I make the meatballs. I make big meatballs. But I like them that way. Why bother with small meatballs? They get hard that way when you cook them. This way, a meatball, a sausage and you have a full meal. I make the meatballs with an egg and a little milk mixed into the bread crumbs. That keeps them moist when they are cooking in the sauce. I use the Italian Fla-

vored bread crumbs, Progresso, and I buy the meat at Johnnie's, they have the best. I fry the meatballs in the pan with the olive oil and onion, just a little bit to get them browned on all sides so they won't break apart in the sauce. . . . Then I take the Contadina tomato paste, just the small can, one can, and I put that in the frying pan and fry it up with the olive oil and grease from the meatballs and sausages. Frying the paste takes the strong taste out. . . . I just put all that in the big pot, a little salt and pepper, maybe basil if I have some from someone's garden in my freezer, and I let it cook all day. I stir it every 15 minutes so it doesn't stick on the bottom. By the time it's done, it's two inches lower from everyone tasting it.

Jean also remains true to the cleaning products that support her performance in the homemaker role she takes so seriously. Windex ("no streaks"), Bounty ("I buy them by the case"), Spic 'n Span ("no residue"), Zest soap ("no tub ring"): each of these brands has demonstrated superior performance capabilities that are rewarded through loyal purchase behaviors and heartfelt commitments. Appliances too (e.g., Electrolux, Frigidaire, Maytag, General Electric, Krups) are afforded loyalty in exchange for reliable assistance in homemaker roles. Many of these relationships have survived 20 years or more. Some serve an ego-defensive function (Katz 1960) by protecting Jean from her fear of being tagged a "dirty Guinea."

Part of Jean's job upon entry into the homemaker role was to master the new world of consumer products put before her. This was a job she performed quite well. Virtually all of the brands Jean uses, from appliances to glass cleaners, have earned distinction as "the best" options available. Jean's credo of "buying the best" removes uncertainty in the performance of valued social roles. It can also be interpreted as a manifestation of Jean's quest for tangible markers of success. By surrounding herself with proven performers, Jean demonstrates to herself and others that her hard work had paid off. "Best brands" provide evidence that Jean has "made it."

Pastene tomatoes, I always buy those, they are the best. They make the best sauce. You can tell the difference. . . . I buy the best vinegar. Progresso . . . Bounty paper towels, they are the best . . . Maytag, they say that is the best . . . Frigidaire makes the best fridge . . . Krups makes the best coffee . . . Electrolux is the best vacuum. It's expensive, yeah, but . . .

Jean bestows the "best" label only after an involved and diligent process reveals one of an array of brand alternatives as the ultimate performer. Once a victor, however, not always the champion. Because of their significance to her sense of self, Jean's chosen brands are tested against able competitors throughout time and are ousted from the portfolio if performance appears lacking.

I always used the Bon Ami but then I noticed that it started scratching the sink. They must have put particles in there or something. I tried the Comet and that really is better.

Jean develops deeply held convictions about product performance to support her perceptions of surviving "best brands". Oftentimes beliefs in utilitarian functioning are bolstered by myths that evolve over the course of the usage experience. These ancillary beliefs mark the brand as superior and irreplaceable, affording resistance to competitive attack.

Pastene whole tomatoes in the can are the best. They use the good tomatoes, the ones that are perfect and nice and ripe. The other brands use the tomatoes that can't pass inspection. . . . Those other shampoos have chemicals that interact with the water in my house so they don't work right. They make my hair flat. This one (Aussie Miracle) doesn't have that. . . . The Tide detergent is better because of the way they make their powders. They do something so the powder dissolves in the washer. The other ones are made different and they don't dissolve. They stay on your clothes.

Jean's beliefs in tradition and heritage help circumscribe likely candidates for her "best brands" portfolio. She prefers "the old way of doing things" and has no doubt that "things made 20 years ago are better than the junk they sell you today." Accordingly, many of Jean's commitments are to classic brands that have demonstrated their reliability over time. Long-standing brands are respected for the wisdom of their experience, a wisdom for which there is no substitute. A classic brand also represents truthfulness, for with long-standing brands there is no hiding behind falsity or pretension. Finally, classics provide *prima facie* evidence of permanence and constancy—important themes dating back to Jean's childhood. Jean anticipates the predictability offered in her classic brands for the welcomed stability this adds in her life.

I have three irons right now; one that someone just gave me that is a hundred years old and that works better! General Electric I think. I really think that the things they made a long time ago were better quality. . . . The stuff that has been around the longest is usually the best, that is why they are there. . . . The people think that because they are newer maybe the people that make them are smarter, but I think the smartest ones are the ones that learn from experience. They have been around a long time and know what is going on. Like Henry at work. He's been there 40 years. Knows the shop inside out. He don't know business like the MBAs from Harvard they hire as his bosses. To them, Henry's stupid because he don't know the things they teach in school. To me, he knows the most.

A thread of personal relationships runs through Jean's brand portfolio as well. At one level, these relationship associations tap into Jean's life theme of affiliation/independence. Jean uses several brands that remind her of favored others, and she enjoys the pleasant memories evoked during product use. She talks of being affected by personal contacts in product and brand choice. For services, Jean tends to deal with people she knows, either through personal involvement or the second-hand familiarity of a respected friend. These contacts also add an

element of trust that reinforces Jean's theme of stability/change and provides a guarantee of performance in important social roles, helping to balance Jean's life theme of marginality versus significance.

I always hated Estée Lauder. Just hated the smell. My mother always used it but not me, I hated it. (My aunt's daughter) Paula gave me some Estée Lauder for Christmas one year after my Mother passed away, oh that was so bad, and I thought, "Oh!" It reminded me of her so much. I kept that bottle and have been buying it ever since.

If I need electric work, I know an electrician. I know someone who paints cars. Someone who paints houses, someone who paints ceilings and walls. They say to use Allan for the carpets. He uses Chem-Dry, that's the best.

After 40 years of shopping, cooking, and cleaning, Jean has become somewhat of an expert consumer ("You ask me how I know it is good tomatoes? I've been making the sauce for 40 years and you ask me how I know?"). This instills in her a confidence in judgment that is not often displayed ("I always feel so stupid when I talk to people from college"). Still, Jean feels constantly challenged on her selection of favorites. Some of this pressure is real, as when friends give her this and that brand for trial comparison. Jean will always try something that a friend has personally recommended, even if this creates conflict from being untrue to her loyal brands. She also feels compelled to stick with manufacturers' brand recommendations ("I use the Murphy's Oil because they say that's the one that works best for their cabinets. . . . The Ford dealer says to use Valvoline"). Other times the pressure is from some imaginary other, the infamous "they" who appoint "best options" in the marketplace. These incidents bring into play a group-versus-self conflict that often leaves Jean in possession of multiple brands competing for her loyalty. Interestingly, in all of the episodes discussed, these moments of seeming infidelity served only to strengthen Jean's beliefs and expressed feelings of attachment to her loyal brands.

They said, "Buy the Kohler stainless steel sink, it is the best." So I did. But I hate it. Never buy a stainless steel sink, it's too hard to keep clean. . . . (My sister-in-law) Darlene bought a ham and she says, "I don't know why you pay six dollars a pound at the ham store, I bought this one next door and it is the best." She gave me a piece of it. Well, I wouldn't give you two cents for it! It's garbage! If I buy a ham, I want to buy a good ham. So, I pay three dollars more from the Honey-Ham store, but it was definitely better. . . . They say that Jif is better and Natural is better and blah, blah, blah. Well, Skippy is the best peanut butter. I have had all the other ones because someone says, you know, "Try it! It has less fat grams or whatever." But, I always, I go back to Skippy every time.

## Case II: Karen

*Karen's Life Story.* Karen is a recently divorced 39-year-old raising two girls aged 8 and 12 while working full-time as an office manager. Karen's demographics

in large part speak to her current life situation: money is tight and Karen is busy. Her day starts at 5:00 A.M. to give her time for exercise while still getting the kids off to school and herself to work before the 8:00 check-in. Afternoons are crazy, with Karen running the kids back and forth to dance classes (young Missy takes tap; Jennifer is advanced in her study of Jazz and ballet), music lessons (Missy plays piano), and Girl Scouts. In her "spare time," Karen is trying to fix up the new apartment she just rented, meet new friends (preferably male), and decide on a car to replace her broken-down Ford. Karen's life is governed by the immediacy of a host of pressing current concerns. It is a life that requires constant juggling and creative flexibility (Crosby 1991; Thompson 1996).

What's my life like? A blur. A rush. A rush from the minute I get up in the morning. I go from one thing to another all day long. If it's not one thing, it's another. Today I had to leave work early to take Missy to the dentist, and then to swimming. I have clothes over there to fold and put away, and the food shopping is still out. The kids have homework to do. You wanna help?

Karen is also involved in two major stage-related life transitions. Recently divorced, Karen is caught between two points of stability, and she is facing decisions that will drastically affect the remaining course of her life (Levinson and Levinson 1996). Karen has the added project of negotiating a prominent midlife crisis (Levinson 1977; Rubin 1979). She experiences a sense of disparity between what she has attained and what she "really wants" and is in the process of reviewing the many voices of "self" she left unattended all these years. A powerful sense tells her that the 40-year mark is a last chance opportunity for pursuing significant paths of change. Another strong voice tells her to focus on raising her children in this new single-parent world. Karen's reassessment of her self-definition along inner versus outer-directed lines constitutes a central life task at this time.

Should I go back to school and get the degree I never finished? Should I move out of this town and go somewhere else? Maybe I should pursue my dream of being a professional tennis player. I know that's crazy, silly, but it's a thought. You know, take time for me for a change? I dunno. The kids . . .

Not knowing exactly what it is that she wants to become, Karen finds herself strongly motivated by the avoidance of a self she does not want to become (Ogilvie 1987). Like Jean, Karen has spent her life within the limits of the city in which she was born. Unlike Jean, however, Karen feels constrained by her familiar surroundings. She senses that her family and social class heritage have circumscribed the options now open to her. She feels somewhat embarrassed by her job since it is "a clear expression of her failure to rise above her station in life." She wants to escape the fate that trapped her mother, a woman divorced at 23, never to marry again.



And, perhaps most important, she wants desperately to provide her kids with the options and encouragement she never received herself as a child.

My Mom never really encouraged me to do anything. And that is just one thing that I am determined about! I don't want to be like my Mom!. . . If there is one thing I do, just ONE thing, I will save my kids from feeling the same way I do when they reach 40.

The concerns of this caring woman (Thompson 1996) create serious conflicts. Karen is torn between doing something for herself and sacrificing herself for her kids. Both goals are of central importance, yet the two are incommensurate. Karen also finds herself torn between a desire for change and a longing for stability. She is at once excited by the potential for growth and overwhelmed by the prospect. At times she finds herself desperate for the return of order and predictability that can help assuage what she often experiences as an "out-of-control life" (Thompson et al. 1990).

Sometimes I just want to STOP! All this goings on, it's getting to be, it's overwhelming. I am always just going. Each day I just get through it and look for the next day to come. I just keep going. Everything is going on but nothing is really happening. You know?

Karen recognizes that this turmoil must be managed. To help her cope with this period of unsettling change, Karen seizes the familiarity of routines, the structure of organized schedules, and the predictability of well-learned habits. These allow her to manage risks and unnecessary sources of uncertainty in an already overcomplicated life.

I pretty well stick with the same things week after week, I mean, in my life. That's sort of how my life is. . . . routine. Every week is sort of the same thing. I am pretty structured. You know, this gets done at this time and that type of thing. It's the only way to survive. Routine, umm, just kind of keeps my mind off of things. It helps me manage more. I just feel that I have to be, just to manage things, I just have to have a calendar, you know?

I find that if you like something, then you stick to it. That's how I am. If I find something in a restaurant I like, I might go back and get that over and over again instead of trying something else that might sound good. That's just how my life seems to be.

Karen struggles through daily life armed with her routines, taking what she describes as the "alcoholics one-day-at-a-time approach to living." She is caught in the whirlwind of a hectic schedule, a condition that often leaves her lamenting the passage of time ("I can't believe it is August already and another summer is over"). For Karen, time is a resource that grows scarcer with each passing day. It slowly diminishes her vitality and closes chapters of opportunities with its passing, leaving her in a somewhat melancholy state questioning how it will all end.

Wherever am I going to find a man, where? I never thought that I would be the one left alone after the divorce. Never. I am turning 40, and there aren't that many available men that age in general left anymore, let alone good ones, and God forbid they live in this small town. Wherever am I going to find a man?

One of the few areas of life satisfaction that Karen currently enjoys concerns her presentation of self in relation to others in her age cohort. While those around her experience the sense of bodily decline that accompanies approach of the 40-year mark, Karen has managed to maintain a youthful appearance. She adheres closely to a regular exercise routine ("I run three miles every day at 5:30, no matter what") and a highly scripted personal care regimen, and strongly believes that these activities have slowed the deleterious effects of time.

People always tell me that I do not look my age. I mean, I work hard not to, so that's good. I did just go to my reunion, you know, and I swear . . . you know, everybody there is the same age and I did feel younger than almost every woman in that place. I really did! I mean, I was just looking at everybody and how they changed. It's good to know that I haven't been getting up everyday at 5 A.M. and taking care of myself for nothing.

*Karen's Brand Relationship Portfolio.* Clear connections between the identity themes uncovered above and the pattern of Karen's brand behaviors can be made, albeit in different ways and at different levels of personal significance than observed in the case of Jean. Of the three women interviewed, Karen expresses the lowest levels of emotional attachment to brands in general and the fewest total brand commitments overall. Most of Karen's brand behaviors are understood within the context of her day-to-day life and the current concerns driving it—a context that on close inspection imbues greater significance to these apparently casual and sporadic behaviors than is typically granted. Several emotionally vested brand relationships transcend this pattern, however, by delivering squarely on Karen's transition-related life projects and bolstering the self-side of me-versus-them valuation equation commanding attention at this time.

The bulk of Karen's brand behaviors make a statement that there are indeed more important things than consumer products occupying her thoughts. Karen expresses general difficulty in recounting stories related to her brands and colors her entire consumer experience with levels of low involvement.

I don't really know what all I buy. I am thinking about it, and it seems I don't buy many brands. . . . Especially during the school year, our life is so busy that I come home and make very simple meals. I don't spend a lot of time at the store.

I don't really remember when all I started using that (brand). I guess it just really didn't, it just really does not matter to me that much.



A lot of these things are just here because I never tried anything else and I just use that brand out of habit. It works. It gets me through.

Clearly, the objective features of Karen's current circumstance act as forces against the thoughtful formation, deepening, and active maintenance of individual brand bonds. Single-mother status has sensitized Karen to issues of finance never experienced before. Now more attentive to sales, considerate of coupons, and willing to stockpile bargains, Karen has broadened her brand consideration sets to maximize chances of saving money. To meet increasingly overwhelming demands on her time, Karen adopts a satisficing approach to brand choice, a "settling for this brand or that," a form of strategic inertia on her part. Karen has adapted the structure of her brand beliefs to support her now common multibrand purchasing behaviors: although she used to think that differences between brands were meaningful, she is now prone to believe that all national contenders in a product category are basically alike.

Detergent seems to be one thing that, I am not very good, hardly ever use coupons, but usually with detergents, sometimes dishwashing liquid, I will use coupons. I have maybe five brands of detergent that I pick between. That way if there is something I like, if there was a great deal on Cheer, then I can go ahead and pick that. With five brands you like, something's always going to be on sale. I used to always buy Tide. To get the kid dirt out. But now I'll use Tide, Cheer, Surf. Whatever is on sale. The big brands are all alike.

Again a likely function of her "day-at-a-time" life situation, Karen's temporal perspective on brands has become narrowly focused on the present. In-store promotions, store flyers, and end-of-aisle displays now affect Karen's brand choice behaviors dramatically. Many of the brands to which Karen was once "loyal" have moved from being "friends of commitment" to something better considered "friends of convenience."

There aren't many brands, I am sitting here now thinking, that I will absolutely not leave the store without, that I would not switch to some other brand. I think maybe, I guess, I probably used to have more favorite brands than I seem to now. I never really thought of that before. It wasn't conscious or anything, you know, like I said "I do not care about such and such brand anymore" or anything like that. It just seems to have sort of happened now that I am thinking about it and noticing it. I just buy what's on sale or what I have the coupon for. Whatever is convenient. I am just not going to go out of my way to get one brand over another. It's just not worth the trouble.

Even exceptions to this rule of passive brand detachment are at times misleading. On close inspection, many of Karen's claimed loyalties are in actuality avoidances from certain brands rather than attractions to others. Some stated preferences reflect the inherited choices of family members rather than felt insistence on her part. The majority of Karen's claimed loyalties seem more accurately

classified as habits than as deeply held convictions. These habits are far from mindless, however. They are "part of a tool chest of strategies for survival during critical life passages" (Olsen 1995, p. 274). They help Karen cope with the current concerns that dominate her day. Karen's habits attain deep meaning by delivering on needs for structure, predictability, and routine that only stable brand relationships can provide.

I always buy Comet. . . . I hate Ajax. . . . At work I use Gateway. I don't really care that it is a Gateway, but we only had the choice between an Apple and the Gateway and I am definitely not an Apple person. . . . I buy Success Rice. Success Rice is the only one in the kind of rice that I want. Ready in five minutes. The others take twenty-five.

Mop and Glo? That was my ex-husband Jim. I never really did like that. . . . Palmolive? That was Jim. . . . The Dove started with him. . . . Mayonnaise? I just bought the brand Jim told me. . . . Cereals? I just buy what is demanded of me.

Karen's stories also reveal several "loyalties" that would escape detection under a temporally bounded microscope. These appear as sporadic and relatively short-lived monogamous cycles (Sherry 1987) rotating within a given use occasion. Individual brand episodes end abruptly with the onset of satiation and are quickly replaced by another brand cycle that is embraced for a time before it, too, is subsequently discarded. The Lender's bagel stage, for example, is replaced by the Eggo waffle stage, which is followed by the Kix or Cheerios phase, and again the Lender's bagel stage, and so on. Candy brands cycle the same way as Snickers alternate with Sourballs and Tootsie Pops within the treat occasion ("I love those. I used to eat them when I was a kid. I hide them in my desk and sneak them during work.").

A parallel between Karen's current life situation and her tendencies to discard and rotate among brands can be made. Both are attempts to seek new stimulation, to "start over." In the face of this apparent disruption, however, the cycling of brand "sets" in resurgent and multibrand loyalties allows Karen to maintain some sense of connection to the past and continuity into the future. Embedded in the familiar, these brand behavior patterns add a sense of stability and predictability to an otherwise turbulent life.

Despite a propensity for emotionally inexpressive and cyclical brand involvements, five brands in Karen's portfolio emerge as affect-laden, committed partnerships. Karen's transition-related life tasks of self-(re)definition and ego enhancement provide the threads uniting these strong brand relationships. It is interesting to note that each of these relationships has been structured by detailed ritual processes. As with her habits, the rituals involving Karen's loyal brands provide a needed sense of stability amid change and chaos. These rituals also provide continual affirmation of the meaning of the brand to the point where each partner is viewed as unique versus competing

alternatives. Through reinforcing rituals, Karen's brand beliefs have deepened into feelings of obsessive dependency that serve to maintain her brand relationships over time and at high levels of affective intensity.

Perhaps the strongest of Karen's relationships is with the Mary Kay brand. Karen believes the various Mary Kay products in her daily regimen are centrally responsible for her youthful appearance and openly admits a dependency on the brand as a result. Occasional slips in brand performance are tolerated, and an otherwise inflexible and stretched schedule is willfully modified to prevent the "unimaginable experience" of withdrawal from the brand.

I use Mary Kay everything. Makeup, lipstick, moisturizer, toner. I think Mary Kay is responsible for how my skin looks now. I do, I really do. I do not think that my skin would be this, so young today if I had used any other brand. I mean, I do see it. I really can tell the difference. . . . My feelings for Mary Kay have increased too. Over time, I think maybe I have come to appreciate the product more. I feel that I just really, like I have really come to depend on it more. And, I, uh, just as I have aged, like, I depend on it more and need it more. I can't live without it now. . . . Well you run out of items at different times. That happened to me once and it was awful. An unimaginable experience! I did not know where to go and I had to wait so long before I got the products I needed. It was my own fault. Now I make sure that I know a representative, and I build into my schedule in advance the time it takes for them to order what you want and get it to you and all. I even buy two sometimes so that I don't run out. I'll even make a special trip to the representative's house to get what I need. Whatever it takes. The worst is if they pull one of your favorite colors from the line. They did that to me with the lipstick. My favorite, absolute favorite shade. I went to buy it and they said it was discontinued. I remember feeling, "how could they do that to me?"

Karen expresses similar feelings for Dove soap, another product that occupies a central place in her daily skin care ritual. As with Mary Kay, Dove is seen as instrumental in the retention of Karen's youthful appearance. Dove also helps Karen negotiate her struggle for an inner versus other-defined self. Since Dove is a brand that others in her household reject, Karen's brand loyalty offers a rare opportunity to exert a sense of independence. This signaling of independent concerns is a crucial step in Karen's inner-self development task.

I started using Dove when I married Jim. I probably used Dial before that because that was what my mother used. But, I started using Dove and I really liked it. I wouldn't use Dial anymore. Dove is just really good for my skin. It is the, you know, one-quarter cleansing cream. I can really tell the difference in how it makes my skin feel. I use it everyday morning and night when I do my makeup and I can definitely tell the difference. Jim still used the Dial because he thought the Dove was too, I dunno, he did not like how it felt. But I wouldn't use anything else. That was a pain: one sink, two soaps. But I did it anyway and listened to him complain about it all the time.

Other realignments in Karen's brand portfolio send this same message of independence. As Karen abruptly severs many of her inherited brand ties, she lays claim to her own desires in the face of others' preferences. In this small way, Karen is winning a contest that has typically seen losses on her side in the past.

Well, we were using the Hellman's because that was the brand Jim wanted. He hated the Miracle Whip. It seems people usually like one and hate the other. Anyway, I didn't care much but now that I am alone we're back with the Miracle Whip. No more Hellman's.

Karen also embraces Reebok, the brand of running shoe she dons each morning at 5:30 A.M. Running has acquired a very special meaning in Karen's life. It symbolizes the first conscious step taken away from marriage. It represents the beginning of a new definition of self. It is a tangible marker of a past, youthful self. Through repeated, ritualized use occasions, Karen has transferred the powerful meanings of running to the Reebok brand (McCracken 1993). Reebok is a symbol of Karen's vitality, her independence, and her overall self-efficacy.

I started running again when umm, right after I decided to leave Jim. I used to run in college when I was training for tennis tournaments. I was quite good at distance running. So, I picked it back up. I run alone mostly. It's hard to convince my friends to get up that early and do it every day. But I do. . . . I wear Reebok running shoes. Me and my Reeboks. They are beat up by now. Want to see them? Like a favorite pair of jeans, you know? You go through so much together.

Another brand entwined in the morning running ritual is Gatorade. Symbolizing accomplishment and self-adequacy and marking a celebration of her "time alone," Gatorade is another product that makes Karen feel good about herself. In exchange for these ego benefits, the brand is rewarded with strong feelings of attachment and commitment. Unlike the beliefs of parity that generally characterize her brands, Karen rejects the very thought of adding another sports beverage to her portfolio despite the potential cost savings at hand.

Gatorade definitely started with the kids. I know I was never into that stuff myself before. But the kids would get sick and the doctor would say, "Give them this and this and this, and Gatorade." I tried it myself one time and eventually adopted a taste for it. Now I drink it all the time. I have it every morning after I come in from my run. I drink it after I clean the house. I always have a glass of it in my hand. That's me. I am very loyal to Gatorade. I would say that I am very loyal to that. I know they have other brands of that now, I see coupons all the time, but I have never even picked up a bottle of them. Never even tried them. Because I like Gatorade a lot. I really do.

A final example of deeply felt loyalty is found in Karen's relationship with Coca-Cola Classic. Unlike the more privately consumed products mentioned above, Karen mentions Coke Classic as a brand that others readily associate with her. One could argue that Karen's brand com-

mitment is driven more by the perceptions others hold of her as a *non-Diet* Coke consumer than by her own tastes and preferences for Coke Classic. In effect, Karen remains loyal to the brand because to switch from it would be an admission that her much respected body image was finally in need of repair.

I think that I am one of the last people that still drinks Coke. Everyone I know wants a Diet Coke all the time. It's always *diet* something. Everyone knows I drink regular Coke. If they were to see me with a Diet Coke, they would be . . . surprised. Because I sort of make a statement when I don't drink Diet that I don't do what everybody else does, that I don't really care about the extra calories that much, that I can afford it. Sorta like, "so there!" When I get a weight problem, then I'll have to switch. I hope that never happens.

### Case III: Vicki

*Vicki's Life Story.* Vicki, 23 years old, is in her second and final year of studying for her masters' degree. Having left the shelter of her family not too long ago, Vicki is in the process of making the transition from dependent child to independent, self-sustaining adult (Marcia 1980). It is a somewhat controlled transition, however, as Vicki attends college only hours from home and remains "half-in and half-out" of each of her divergent worlds. Vicki enjoys spheres of autonomy and privacy within the confines of her own apartment, yet relies on parental advice when making important life decisions. She actively maintains ties to her home base while making concerted efforts to separate herself from her family, reduce her dependency on their support and authority, and develop a new life of her own. A conflict between dependence and independence, and between self versus other results from these simultaneous connections.

Umm, well, my parents they take care of my car and health insurance, but I work part-time to pay the rent and get spending money. I do it on my own.

I like my hometown. I keep my same hairdresser there, and my doctor and dentist is there. Tons of my friends from high school are still there. I go back and visit a lot. I think I might even go back there and live with my parents for a while when I graduate to save money before I start my career. I would like my own place eventually.

Vicki's experience is not unlike that of other college-aged students living away from home who anticipate entry into the independent world of adulthood (Cantor and Langston 1989; Waterman, Geary, and Waterman 1974). This is a phase of serious self-concept negotiation. It is a time for exploring possible roles and identities and for making provisional commitments to some working definition of self. Vicki's career-self project is a particularly salient work-in-progress at this time.

I do not know whether I should do the non-thesis option here with this masters and be done with it. I always assumed I would do a thesis and be a researcher. I always

thought I wanted to be a professor. But, that just does not seem to be working out. I don't even have a thesis idea, hello! I dunno, I haven't decided. But I *have* been going to a career counselor. I was working in their office part-time and I thought "HEY! I should do this myself! Duh!" So, I took those tests about what I am good at and they have been working with me to identify my strengths or whatever and what careers would work for my personality and they say I should work with people. Do counseling intervention. So I am thinking maybe I should move home and see if I can get a job like that. I'm thinking about it. I got that big, *The Chronicle of Higher Ed*, and I'm checking that out.

The task of settling roles and identities related to the concept of family is also salient at this time. Vicki's days are largely organized around the activities of attracting a boyfriend and cultivating a meaningful relationship toward the goal of marriage. A pivotal meaning structure Vicki applies to her concept of self-as-partner centers on notions of femininity and sexuality. It is a femininity with undertones of wholesomeness.

It is time I had a boyfriend. A serious boyfriend, not just a boyfriend. I'm getting to that age. I was going out with this guy for four years. Four years! I still go see him sometimes. He is coming here for a football game this fall. Yeah, I am openly looking, I go out with my girlfriends every Thursday and Friday night cruising the bars or whatever. I am dating this "younger man" but I am not sure he is the one for me. Deep down I hope my old boyfriend comes back. I really think he's the one. Maybe.

I know I am not beautiful in the stereotypical beauty definition of things. But I am very, I wanna say, wholesome, pure, whatever, but I mean, to me, that is what's important. My hair, my scents, my clothes. Everything is very feminine and wholesome. Guys like that.

Relationship activity is high during this period of concentrated identity work (Stueve and Gerson 1977). New friendships that capitalize on emerging interests are sought, and those that no longer fit evolved self-conceptions are discarded (Cantor and Langston 1989). Friendships help anchor the self in activities and beliefs considered critical to self-expression. Vicki takes her interpersonal commitments very seriously in light of their value-pronouncement capabilities.

I have tons of friends. High school friends. Friends from when we lived in New Jersey, from my hometown, from here. From the program. From work. From aerobics class. Friends from all phases of my life. They're like a photo album of my life.

If you are my close friend, you are my friend forever. I do not commit myself lightly. Being true to my friends and always being there for them is very important to me.

In summary, Vicki's transitional life task is to explore the possibilities of the adult world, arrive at an initial definition of the self as adult, and fashion a world consistent with the external and internal dimensions of that definition. Within the goal-based personality structure,



Vicki's dominant projects concern provisional identity construction (Little 1989) and the testing of a variety of possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986). The negotiation of tensions between individuation versus separation and stability versus change is integral to this experience.

*Vicki's Brand Relationship Portfolio.* It is interesting to take this pattern of change and apparent confusion and lay it against Vicki's brand relationship portfolio. Of the three women interviewed, Vicki was not only the most involved with brands in general but also the most emotionally loyal to specific brands in particular. The type of person that Vicki is and the particular stage in which she finds herself appear highly conducive to brand relationship initiation activities and the formation of close relationship ties.

Vicki's brand behaviors are primarily reflective of the degree and depth to which she readily links brands with concepts of self. To Vicki, products and brands compose an efficient meaning-based communication system. And, Vicki is an active consumer of these symbols and signs. "God," she confesses, "I am every marketer's dream!" A child weaned on mass communication and MTV, Vicki is a master of advertising slogans and brand imagery. She is especially adept at constructing and announcing identities through brand symbols and believes that others rely on this communication system as well. Vicki relayed several instances in which friends willingly and spontaneously used brands to classify who and what she is all about (Holt 1995). In this sense, many of the brands to which Vicki professes loyalty serve as realized extensions of her sense of self (Belk 1988).

I went through a stage once where I used Ivory everything. Ivory soap. Ivory shampoo. Ivory conditioner. I was the biggest Ivory girl that could have possibly been walking! But, it was just, you know, something that I wanted to, something that, something about that that I internalized or whatever. . . . I think I was like in ninth grade, I was like 14 or 15. But the thing is, my whole life people have been telling me, "You look like an Ivory girl." That makes you feel special! I kind of took it as a compliment, I mean, 'cause they always had real clean, pretty, fresh-looking people, you know, not beautiful, but wholesome and pure. Who wouldn't want to be thought of as queen-natural and wholesome? I mean, I heard that for years from all different people. I still do.

Everyone knows what brand of toothpaste I use. Just in discussing it, I mean, among friends or whatever, people know that Vicki uses Crest. That is just a given. . . . I asked my girlfriend what brands she would associate with me, you know, 'cause we are doing this study? And she said without hesitation, "Oh, Soft 'n Dry, definitely!" Because there is a Soft 'n Dry incident that we shared together. I saw my best friend recently and we were talking about it. The night before my speech for the junior high vice-president position. I slept over her house the night before and left my Soft 'n Dry there so I didn't have it at school. Did I freak! She brought it to school for me in a brown paper bag. I had to have it. I thought I would die without it. I

was like a living commercial: nervous is why you need Soft 'n Dry. My sister says the same thing. She says Soft 'n Dry smells like me. That my closets, my things all have that smell, the "Vicki smell."

Unlike Jean, whose loyalties tend to converge upon a self as defined within the mother/wife role, Vicki at once incorporates a variety of brands in support of the multiple dimensions of self she is actively considering and maintaining (Gergen 1991; Markus and Nurius 1986).

Me, I have perfumes, that I have, like, different labels for them for when I want to wear them. They say different things about me. You know, like, I wear Opium, it is my nighttime seductive scent. And, my friendly everyday Vicki scent is Intimate Musk. And, I love Giorgio. It is one of the few scents that I wear and people come up to me and say, "You smell good!" and when I tell them what I am wearing, they are like, "It doesn't smell that way on me!" That is my all around "get noticed" scent.

Look in my shower here. Look! Seven bottles of shampoo and six conditioners and I use them all! And in here (the closet); this whole box is full of trial sizes that I pull from. Why? Because each one is different. It depends on my mood and what kind of a person I want to be. Like right now I can tell you used Aveda Elixir. I can smell the tree bark. I smell Aveda a mile away. Trying to be earthy and responsible are you?

Many of the brands with which Vicki develops close relationships—perfumes, makeup, lingerie—have an image of femininity that directly supports her self-as-partner identity quest. Vicki has decided that scents and florals reflect her desired image of wholesomeness and is driven to brands that convey these meanings. Vicki admits she is often more loyal to the floral/scent subtheme than to the individual products and brands chosen to reflect that theme.

I am loyal in every sense of the word to Opium-scented. Oh, I also have Opium-scented candles. Potpourri. Drawer liners. Opium-scented soap. I am remembering all this stuff now! I guess you could say that I am loyal to the smell.

I am in a big floral kick right now. Everything is flowers. I mean, floral sheets, floral comforter, floral bras from Victoria's Secret, floral-scented shampoo and conditioner. Like the Aromatics Mint and Rosemary shampoo that my friend gave me because she didn't like it. See, she knew that about me too. Anyway, you name it! Hair spray. Everything! That is just my, that is what motivates me now. All these new shampoos that have the floral extracts and stuff? I am eating that stuff up sideways! I don't know if it is this "surge in femininity" coming out or what. If you want to take this floral metaphor further, I mean, at this point in my life, I feel very, I mean, I'm trying, I'm hoping one day to attract maybe a date or a boyfriend, and I am a lot more delicate and vulnerable now. And, it's just this big flower kick, it fits somehow.

Reflecting her reliance on the communicative power of brands, Vicki admits being disturbed when she cannot find a brand that completely delivers her desires. She will



engage a search that may take years to ensure that the “perfect” brand partner is identified.

In high school, I had friends that wore some scent. One of my friends, Mimi, she had this image that she always wanted to project, you know, and she always used the same perfumes over and over again. I mean everyday, she just smelled the same, she was just the same. And it was just consistent. You could count on her for that. And, I dunno, I knew I didn't have a smell. I didn't have anything! After a lot of thinking and looking around, I decided that I wanted to wear Musk. That just clicked. So, for Christmas, we went looking for my musk scent, me and my Mom. So we went and we tried on so many. We went back so many times, different times of the day, different days. And the ones that were the nicest were the Intimate Musk by Revlon and the Jordache Love Musk, and I remember that year for Christmas, they bought me a bottle of each. And so I had these two musks to go back and forth from over the next year or so. And, eventually, Intimate Musk became the absolute favorite and I have gotten that every year since.

Vicki's experiments with potential brand partners resemble a series of trial courtships. Having survived a stringent initial screening, Vicki's brands are granted temporary loyalty status during a provisional in-home trial period. Candidates are promoted to “brands of commitment” after ample time has passed in which they are proven or disproved as worthy image partners. As with Jean, brands that survive testing often acquire an elaborate performance mythology that personalizes brand meaning and insulates the brand versus competition. Again, these mythic meanings are reinforced and solidified through ritualistic use occasions.

If I just buy something once, I am not going to feel loyalty to it. I believe these things have to prove themselves to me. I have to use it for awhile before I am sure it's the right brand and I make the final commitment.

I knew from experience that Crest was most effective for, you know, the enzymes in my mouth. I mean, being the tooth freak that I am, I know that everybody's saliva is different and the way that it combines with toothpaste to combat cavities is different, and the Crest is just right for me and the type of saliva I have.

Further deepening the felt experience of Vicki's strong brand relationships is her centrally held personal belief in faithfulness. Vicki aspires to be true to herself in everything she does and to remain committed to the doctrines she openly professes to others. In Vicki's value system, brand commitment is an obligation of the person who receives consistently delivered product quality. Her own oft-used description of the two-sided nature of her loyal brand relations as being “tried and true” reflects this quality: “if you try a brand and it is true to you in consistently delivering quality, you must reciprocate by being true to it through consistent purchase.” By being faithful to her brands, Vicki's own personal standards are not compromised, and her core self remains intact. In this

sense, Vicki's loyalty to the brand can be interpreted as loyalty to the self.

I guess it is like, maybe I should not bring this up, but it is kind of like religion. Shoot, I will go to any kind of church service, but it's not going to make me change my beliefs in any way. I don't want to say that I am closed-minded, but I do stick to what I believe in. And that pretty much is something that always guides me. It is like sticking up for what you believe in. In high school, when we had to put a quote under our picture? I don't know if I can remember the exact words but, it was like, “in high school, I have learned to stand up for what I believe in and to not let the opinions of others influence my own.” And, I always stick to that. I don't know if loyal is the word, but I do stick to my guns. I am not looking at this solely in terms of consistency, it is more like having a backbone. If you don't have things you believe in, you are going to be wishy-washy, you know?

I'm a little biased. If you use a product, you should believe in it . . . I mean, in a way I guess that maybe it is not necessarily being loyal to the *product* that is at issue, but being loyal to myself by consistently buying it. You're true to what you believe in.

Amid all this talk of commitment, it is somewhat startling to note the switching behaviors that coexist with Vicki's claimed loyalties. Consistent with her current self-exploration theme, Vicki likes to “keep her finger on the pulse of what is going on in the market.” She stays abreast of new product introductions by reading published information and conducting extensive “product experiments.” Her ample trial size collections of shampoos and other personal care products illustrate this tendency. Yet, Vicki proclaims a desire for “stability within (her) variety.” She swears loyalty to the brands she holds most central, even when caught occasionally “fooling around.”

I keep up with all the new stuff, and I will always try it. But there are the tried and true things that I will always keep. On the whole I am pretty consistent. Even if I use another one every once in a while, it's okay. You have to have your little flings, right? To see what's out there?

More surprising, then, is to observe the readiness with which Vicki can terminate a long-standing, seemingly committed brand relationship. Looking across the pattern of her brand relationships over time, many of Vicki's loyalties acquire a transient quality, reflecting more a character of infatuation than one of true love and commitment. This dynamism is in part a function of her own volatile sense of self. As she experiments with life and evolves her self-definition toward an accepted conclusion, so does her brand portfolio change in response.

At this stage in my life, there is a definite floral identification there, and I don't know what that is going to fall into next. . . . The Ivory Girl is me now, but will I always be that? I don't know.

Other changes in Vicki's portfolio are a result of increased experience with the consumer role. As Vicki be-

comes an independent thinker with her own views about the marketplace, she slowly sheds the relationships inherited from her mother (Moore-Shay and Lutz 1988) and redefines her loyalties in response. Other portfolio shifts are environmentally imposed, their consequences experienced as personal betrayals of the brand.

This is the first box of tea bags that I have ever bought on my own. That was a dilemma! I bought Tetley. Those were the kind that my mother had sent me originally that I had just finished. That was the little bit of info that I had. I was stumped. Next time maybe I will buy something else, you know, branch out on my own here.

When we moved (here), it really bothered me that they didn't sell B&M Baked Beans. They had Friends, whatever the hell that is. So I buy those, but I miss B&M. And, Oh! Ice cream! No more Friendly's! It's like I had to abandon them! I felt really bad. I go to Friendly's every time I go back. I love that place.

In the final analysis, Vicki is loyal, not to a particular brand per se, but to a perpetual succession of able brand communicators. In this sense Vicki is loyal to the process of loyalty itself.

Oh, did I tell you I am into this new toothpaste? Mentadent? It has sodium bicarbonate baking soda in two different channels that don't come together until you put them on your brush. Makes your mouth feel like you are at the hygienist. Crest, well, yeah . . .

### Summary of the Idiographic Analysis

The above analysis illustrates how the projects, concerns, and themes that people use to define themselves can be played out in the cultivation of brand relationships and how those relationships, in turn, can affect the cultivation of one's concept of self. For each woman interviewed, the author was able to identify an interconnected web of brands that contributed to the enactment, exploration, or resolution of centrally held identity issues. Thus, relationships were seen to cohere at a portfolio level where brands were marshaled across category boundaries for their meaning-provision purposes. Since different identity issues were salient for the three women interviewed, three very different patterns of consumer-brand relationships were identified. These patterns varied not only in level and content of the organizing identity activities but also in the number of brand relationships in the portfolio, the durability of those relationships, the proportion of relationships that were closely held, and the emotional quality of resulting commitments. It is interesting that parallels between an individual's relationships in the brand and interpersonal spheres can also be readily drawn, which suggests that classification by relationship styles (Matthews 1986) and orientations (McAdams 1988) may prove a meaningful mode of analysis.

To review and summarize, Jean's brand relationship portfolio is composed of strong, committed partnerships

that deliver meanings squarely devoted to the resolution of her existential life themes. Jean has developed over 40 strong relationships with packaged food and cleaning brands that experience has taught her are "the best" since this label guarantees favorable performance in highly valued traditional roles of homemaker, mother and wife. These are roles in which Jean first demonstrated her validity as an essential human being over 40 years ago; they are roles in which she continues to reaffirm her self-worth each and every day of her life. A never-ending search for a sense of belonging and stability has also led Jean to value heritage and tradition and to seek and maintain relationships with classic (and oftentimes ethnic) brands in response. "Falling in love" with brands that can provide perceived self-efficacy and self-esteem (Aron, Paris, and Aron 1995) allows Jean to move toward the resolution of her feelings of marginality and the expression of autonomy in her life world. By connecting at these deep levels, Jean's brand relationships attain status as truly committed partnerships, many surviving 20 years of testing trials or more. Jean displays a discerning style in constructing her brand relationship portfolio, carefully selecting a subgroup of partnerships from available relationship opportunities and rewarding those affiliations with deep feelings of commitment and long-term fidelity. Jean's style of assembling a tested portfolio of strongly held, dedicated, and enduring relationships is mirrored in her interpersonal sphere as well: if you are Jean's friend, and if you demonstrate this repeatedly through your behaviors, Jean rewards you with unassailable loyalty. So, too, is this tendency observed with Jean's chosen brands.

Vicki's story contrasts sharply with Jean's, both in the salient identity issues defining the individual and in the brand relationship patterns that result. Like Jean, Vicki lets others define her. But Vicki believes that others' evaluations are a function of the symbolic brand cues she displays and uses rather than the brand-supported performances she renders in valued social roles. Vicki is strongly motivated by the powers of brand image in a hypersignified postmodern society (Goldman and Sapson 1994). She believes in the linguistic power of brands to the point where she is convinced that friends can effortlessly detail which brands she uses and which she avoids. In this sense, Vicki's brand relationships are highly functional in enabling her projects of identity exploration, construction, and pronouncement. Through a process of integration (Holt 1995), Vicki readily adapts her identity to fit the powerful institutionalized brand meanings she judges as relevant in this task (e.g., "That particular brand just 'fit' somehow." "Musk: that just *clicked* for me"). In line with the hypersignified condition said by some to characterize postmodern society, it is not *one* self that Vicki seeks to express but a *multiplicity* of potential and realized selves (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Gergen 1991). Vicki is a kaleidoscope of images, each finely tuned to the situation at hand, and each seeking signification in the brand world (Gordon 1994). Vicki adopts an acquisitive relationship style in response, collecting a broad array of

brand relationships to reflect each and every realm of her lived identity experiences. She shows no trepidation in moving to better-equipped brand communicators with each evolution of self and finds reconstruction of her brand portfolio easy with the bits and pieces marketing culture provides. These tendencies are operative in Vicki's personal relationship sphere as well, where the drive to accumulate a vast and evolving network of situationally defined friendships is apparent.

A postmodern interpretation of Vicki's brand behaviors recognizes that the fragmented consumer "lives in a world of contradictions of his/her own making" (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 260) and "seeks neither repressive unity nor conformity but freedom of movement in an expansive space" (p. 253). In other words, Vicki's brand-supported project of identity construction, as framed within postmodern society, may never be completed. Although Vicki's life story forces appreciation of her personal commitment to the fundamental notions of loyalty and faithfulness, Vicki denies herself exclusivity and longevity in her brand loyalty expressions. Self-fragmentation breeds multibrand and transient loyalties since there is "no single project, no one lifestyle, no one sense of being to which one needs to commit" (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 253).

Karen's case offers yet another formula through which brand portfolios provide meaning to the self, this time by connecting not only to life projects or themes but to important current concerns as well. Karen's relationship style is independent: although a few brand relationships attain entry into an inner sanctum of closely held partnerships, the majority are chance-dictated affiliations maintained at fairly superficial levels of connection. Unlike Jean and Vicki, Karen's stories reveal only a limited number of close, albeit dependent, brand partnerships. The carefully selected brands in Karen's inner sanctum share an ability to make her feel good about herself, both by keeping a feared and undesired aging self successfully at bay and by providing expression of personal convictions in a battle between inner- and other-directed selves (Ogilvie 1987). Several brands that Karen does not even use qualify as meaningful in this regard as well. Karen's avoidance of Diet Coke and her rejection of brands inherited from her ex-husband and mother are purposive strategies for asserting a new sense of identity and independence. These adversarial relationships are instrumental because they help Karen define who she is through a statement of who she is not (Englis and Solomon 1997; Ogilvie 1987). Even the seemingly vulnerable multibrand and cyclical relationships that populate Karen's portfolio are valuable in that they help her negotiate the pressing current concerns that are integral to the single-parent experience. Although these relationships are far from loyal in the traditional sense of the word, they reflect stable, predictable alliances dedicated to meaning provision in an important life sphere.

An alternate interpretation of the styles of connection uniting consumer and brand focuses not on the clinical

and idiosyncratic context of the individual's life world but on the socially embedded nature of that world (cf. Holt 1997; Thompson 1996). The contrasting patterns of relationality reported above may reflect broader sociohistorical influences that changed the definition of a woman's central identity and, as a result, the role of brand relationships in managing that identity. This cohort hypothesis suggests a classification of brand relationship styles or patterns as either traditional (Jean), postmodern (Vicki), or transitional (Karen).

The "traditional" relationship pattern is perhaps not uncommon among women who came of age in the 1950s and were taught to define self-worth along gendered lines (Rainwater, Coleman, and Handel 1959). The rise of mass marketing during this period in history encouraged women to seek mastery of the consumer role, as this said much about one's overall performance as wife and mother (Cowan 1983). Advertising cultivated respect for powerful leading brands (Olsen 1995), supporting the formation of expansive portfolios of relationships with classic brands—relationships that benefited, perhaps, from the same stable and deeply rooted commitments sought within interpersonal networks at the time (Rainwater et al. 1959). Those in Vicki's cohort are relatively free from traditional role expectations and gender-biased interpretations of mass market brands. "Generation X" is a product of a postmodern society that encourages construction of highly individuated identities through eclectic borrowing of the fragments available in consumer culture. Women of this era are trained for growth and change; they are encouraged to develop wings, not roots. Interpersonal relationship networks of the postmodern age are characterized as disposable and fragmentary (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Perhaps Vicki, too, possesses a characteristic generational portfolio organizing her brands: one that is constituted of evolving sequences of infatuations with highly signified brands. Karen's cohort is caught between these two worlds. It is composed of modern women who have distanced themselves from traditional role-oriented self-definitions but who have not yet fully embraced the possibilities available to postmodern women (Levinson and Levinson 1996). This broadly defined liminal condition may be reflected in a brand portfolio such as Karen's in which the erratic components tap an underlying current of indecision, the cyclical elements offer welcomed returns to the familiar, and the obsessive dependencies at the core serve as anchors in a sea of change. Abandonment of tradition and community may also cultivate an empty sense of self within this transitional group (Cushman 1990) and a "pathological absence of intimacy, emblematic of a contemporary failure to relate" (Alper 1996, p. 10). These observations suggest brand relationship portfolios that are largely superficial, such as that which Karen evidences here.

Whether one adopts a psychological or sociohistorical interpretation of the data, the conclusion suggested in the analysis is the same: brand relationships are valid at the level of consumers' lived experiences. The consumers in

this study are not just buying brands because they like them or because they work well. They are involved in relationships with a collectivity of brands so as to benefit from the meanings they add into their lives. Some of these meanings are functional and utilitarian; others are more psychosocial and emotional. All, however, are purposive and ego centered and therefore of great significance to the persons engaging them. The processes of meaning provision, manipulation, incorporation, and pronouncement authenticate the relationship notion in the consumer-brand domain.

It is important in closing this analysis to acknowledge an important issue concerning the coherence of the stories as told. Clearly, the ties the author has drawn between informants and their brandscapes are tidy ones. The intention in sifting through the data was to identify unifying themes most capable of organizing a vast and divergent portfolio of brand usage patterns, not to explicitly account for each and every identified brand bond. Evidence of multiplicity, incongruity, and instability is contained in the data. Jean, for example, maintains brands that do not deliver squarely on her life themes and gendered identities; Karen supports relationships that do not help her negotiate transitional life projects or current concerns. Vicki, surely, is not the only woman interviewed who entertains multiple aspects of self. Others considering the same data will likely uncover additional themes in the analytic process. The assertion made here is that the themes unifying personal lives and brandscapes capture some regularity and consistency in cross-category brand behaviors and are therefore valid interpretations of the ties that bind consumers to their brands. Transferability of these interpretations to different life and brand settings remains an empirical, researchable question for consideration in future works.

## CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

### Circumscribing the Field of Consumer-Brand Relationships

With the validity of the consumer-brand relationship notion established at the level of lived experience, the analysis moves to the cross-case platform for theoretical specification of the brand relationship domain. Consumers' descriptions of the 112 brand relationships available for study constitute the data for this task. First, the problem of creating a property space of consumer-brand relationship types is considered. Seven prominent dimensions were identified as emergent categories in a text-based analysis of the data: voluntary (deliberately chosen) versus imposed, positive versus negative, intense versus superficial (casual), enduring (long-term) versus short-term, public versus private, formal (role- or task-related) versus informal (personal), and symmetric versus asymmetric. These dimensions highlight many relationship domains that have received only scant attention in our literature. Casual relationships, for example, are deliberated

much less often by consumer researchers than intense, long-term connections. Preference-driven (attraction) relationships are a more likely focus of study than relationships characterized by avoidance (moving away from) or negative affect. Asymmetric dependencies are ignored in a paradigm emphasizing the ideal of symbiotic exchange among equal partners. Enduring brand relationships held in private domains have been largely ignored for their seemingly more emotive and involved public counterparts. Finally, we know more about "formal" brand relations structured by role signification than about personal relationships based on individuated brand meanings, and our knowledge of consciously deliberated brand choices is far greater than those that are nonvoluntary or chance-driven in nature. Clearly, a consideration of the dimensions along which brand relationships vary can do much to broaden the scope of our inquiries.

Fifteen meaningful relationship forms emerge from a joint consideration of the relationship dimensions identified above. These are described in Table 1 through the use of conceptual analogues in the interpersonal sphere for labeling purposes. Examples from informant brand stories are also provided for illustration of the various relationship classes. Again, the working typology highlights several distinctions of potential theoretical importance. Different forms of relating under the rubrics of friendship (e.g., compartmentalized or circumscribed friendships, childhood buddies, best friends, casual friends) and marriage (e.g., marriage of convenience, committed partnership, arranged marriage) are identified. Several "dark side" relationships (i.e., dependency, enmity, enslavement, and secret affairs) are also noted, bringing brand-level specification to general concepts of addiction (Hirschman 1992) and compulsive consumption (O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Rook 1987). Temporally oriented relationship categories are also revealed, as with courtships and flings. The portfolio of brand relationships operative for a given individual, or across individuals for a given brand or category, can be usefully summarized by using the types noted here.

The delineation of relationship types is important in several regards. First, relationship classes tend to yield particular benefits, thus providing different contributions to personality development (Weiss 1974). Ego support, for example, is typically provided through best friendships, coping through dependencies, security through parent-child affiliations, and ego stimulation through compartmentalized friendships. In evaluating how brand relationships affect personality development, and how personality, in turn, affects the brand relationships that are sought, it seems necessary to maintain strict relationship distinctions. Second, relationship types vary in their maintenance requirements (Rose and Serafica 1986). Jean's "committed partnerships," for example, need constant relationship work and continued reaffirmation against possible marketplace alternatives. Karen's "arranged marriages" were once maintained solely through obligation bonds. Vicki's "casual friendships" seem only to



**TABLE 1**  
A TYPOLOGY OF CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIP FORMS

Relationship form	Definition	Case examples
Arranged marriages	Nonvoluntary union imposed by preferences of third party. Intended for long-term, exclusive commitment, although at low levels of affective attachment.	Karen's adoption of her ex-husband's preferred brands (e.g., Mop 'n Glo, Palmolive, Hellman's); Jean's use of Murphy's Oil soap as per manufacturer recommendation.
Casual friends/buddies	Friendship low in affect and intimacy, characterized by infrequent or sporadic engagement, and few expectations for reciprocity or reward.	Karen and her household cleaning brands.
Marriages of convenience	Long-term, committed relationship precipitated by environmental influence versus deliberate choice, and governed by satisficing rules.	Vicki's switch to southern regional Friend's Baked Beans brand from favored B&M brand left behind in the northeast.
Committed partnerships	Long-term, voluntarily imposed, socially supported union high in love, intimacy, trust, and a commitment to stay together despite adverse circumstances. Adherence to exclusivity rules expected.	Jean and virtually all her cooking, cleaning, and household appliance brands; Karen and Gatorade.
Best friendships	Voluntary union based on reciprocity principle, the endurance of which is ensured through continued provision of positive rewards. Characterized by revelation of true self, honesty, and intimacy. Congruity in partner images and personal interests common.	Karen and Reebok running shoes; Karen and Coke Classic; Vicki and Ivory.
Compartmentalized friendships	Highly specialized, situationally confined, enduring friendships characterized by lower intimacy than other friendship forms but higher socioemotional rewards and interdependence. Easy entry and exit attained.	Vicki and her stable of perfumes.
Kinships	Nonvoluntary union with lineage ties.	Vicki's brand preference for Tetley tea or Karen's for Ban, Joy, and Miracle Whip, all of which were inherited from their mothers.
Rebounds/ avoidance-driven relationships	Union precipitated by desire to move away from prior or available partner, as opposed to attraction to chosen partner per se.	Karen's use of Comet, Gateway, and Success Rice.
Childhood friendships	Infrequently engaged, affectively laden relation reminiscent of earlier times. Yields comfort and security of past self.	Vicki's Nestle's Quik and Friendly's ice cream; Jean's use of Estée Lauder, which evokes memories of her mother.
Courtships	Interim relationship state on the road to committed partnership contract.	Vicki and her Musk scent brands during initial trial period.
Dependencies	Obsessive, highly emotional, selfish attractions cemented by feeling that the other is irreplaceable. Separation from other yields anxiety. High tolerance of other's transgressions results.	Karen and Mary Kay; Vicki and Soft 'n Dry.
Flings	Short-term, time-bounded engagements of high emotional reward, but devoid of commitment and reciprocity demands.	Vicki's trial size shampoo brands.
Enmities	Intensely involving relationship characterized by negative affect and desire to avoid or inflict pain on the other.	Karen and her husband's brands, post-divorce; Karen and Diet Coke; Jean and her other-recommended-but-rejected brands (e.g., Jif peanut butter, Kohler stainless steel sinks).
Secret affairs	Highly emotive, privately held relationship considered risky if exposed to others.	Karen and the Tootsie Pops she sneaks at work.
Enslavements	Nonvoluntary union governed entirely by desires of the relationship partner. Involves negative feelings but persists because of circumstances.	Karen uses Southern Bell and Cable Vision because she has no other choice.

require regular and frequent interaction to sustain them, while her childhood friendships, in contrast, endure despite infrequent contact because of the weight of the relationship rewards they provide. Variations in decline processes (i.e., the failure of maintenance activities) are noted as well across the different relationship classes. The subset of 30 terminated brand relationships contained in informants' stories suggests two general models of relationship deterioration. In the entropy model, relationships fall apart unless actively maintained; in the stress model, relationships are forcefully destroyed by the intrusion of personal, brand, dyadic, or environmental stress factors (see Exhibit 1). Deterioration in the casual relations contained in the data was best characterized by the entropy model, while breakdowns in intense or committed partnerships were better captured with the stress formulation.

This latter point suggests the broader observation that relationship types vary in their overall developmental characteristics (Neimeyer and Neimeyer 1985). A sampling of alternative trajectories derived from informants' own visual depictions of the developmental courses of their primary brand relationships, as refined by detail from their retrospective brand histories, is contained in Figure 1. The paths are noteworthy in their divergence from the classic biological development model most frequently articulated for long-term brand partnerships. Variability in the temporal patterning of brand relationship development cycles suggests value in identifying factors that encourage strength across relationship forms as a useful diagnostic device.

## Conceptualizing Consumer-Brand Relationship Strength

The final step in preliminary specification of the consumer-brand relationship field concerns development of an indicator of overall relationship quality, depth, and strength. Judging from research in the interpersonal field (Glenn 1990), an informed relationship quality construct can serve as a meaningful starting point for the articulation of a comprehensive brand relationship framework. Relationship quality is the most frequently studied variable in the human relationships literature. It has been shown to predict a range of important dyadic consequences including relationship stability and satisfaction (Lewis and Spanier 1979), accommodation tendencies (Rusbult et al. 1991), attribution biases (Bradbury and Fincham 1990), reactions to betrayal (Berscheid 1983), and responses to attractive alternatives in the environment (Johnson and Rusbult 1989). Relationship quality offers potential in organizing a vast nomological field, an important step for introductory research in the area. While the claim that quality includes in its network "the entire range of variables of special interest in the relationship field" may be overstated (Spanier and Lewis 1980, p. 826), the construct arguably encompasses many of the concerns said to promote pro-relationship motivation. Quality, perhaps more than any other construct, can capture the richness of the fabric from which brand relationships arise.

Toward this end, the stories elicited for 35 strong brand

## EXHIBIT 1

### DISSOLUTION MODELS FOR CASUAL AND COMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS

I. **Stress model.** Relationship deterioration and dissolution actively precipitated by salient environmental, partner-oriented, or dyadic interrupts. Developmental trajectory of the relationship experiences sudden and marked decline in response.

#### A. Environmental stresses:

*Situationally imposed stressors.* Disturbance invoked by change in physical situation that renders relationship continuity impossible or highly unlikely (e.g., move to different geographic area in which brand is not available causes abrupt decline of relationship, as with Vicki and Friendly's ice cream).

*Intrusion of alternatives.* Disturbance precipitated by interference from imposing, attractive, or superior alternatives (e.g., introduction of long-awaited product benefit under competing brand name, as with Vicki and Mentadent).

#### B. Partner-oriented stresses:

*Personally-induced stressors.* Disorder motivated by change in personality, roles, needs, or values that renders consumer-product "fit" unacceptable (e.g., Karen reveals switch to Diet Coke four years after original interview in response to reconciled battle against an aging self).

*Managerially imposed stressors.* Disorder resulting from managerial decision to terminate the relationship or alter the brand partner role (e.g., Karen's relationship with Mary Kay Moisture Lipstick terminated when manufacturer pulls line from the shelf).

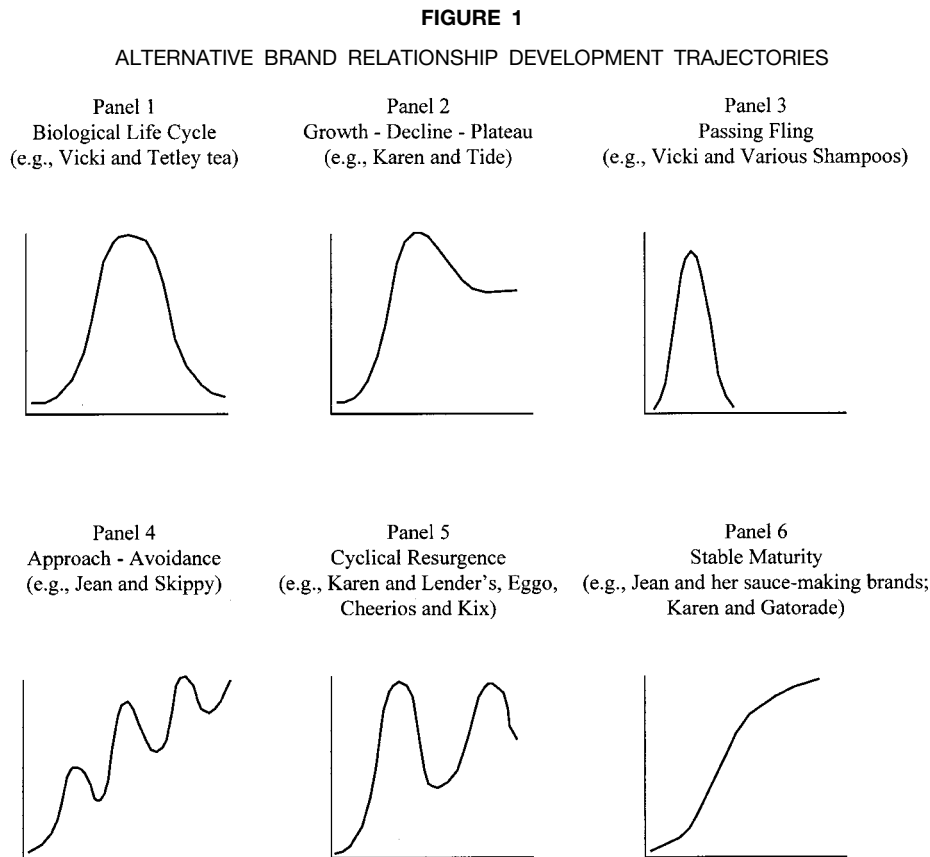
#### C. Dyadic/relational stresses:

Trespass of unwritten relationship rules, breach of trust, failure to keep a promise, or perception of neglect on part of relationship partner (e.g., Jean's perception of inconsistent quality delivery by Bon Ami partner).

II. **Entropy model.** Relationship deterioration and dissolution resulting from failure to consciously and actively maintain the relationship. Dissolution trajectory characterized by a subtle and gradual "fading away."

relationships were contrasted with other brand stories to reveal factors contributing to stability and durability over time. These strong brand relationships were identified by informants in a card sort to preserve phenomenological significance of the relationship pool. A six-faceted brand relationship quality construct (BRQ) was inducted through this analysis. The multifaceted nature of the construct highlights that there is more to keeping a relationship alive than the pull of positive feelings: affective and socioemotive attachments (love/passion and self-connection), behavioral ties (interdependence and commitment), and supportive cognitive beliefs (intimacy and brand partner quality) combine to yield strength and durability over time.

*Love and Passion.* At the core of all strong brand relationships was a rich affective grounding reminiscent of concepts of love in the interpersonal domain. The affect supporting brand relationship endurance and depth was much greater than that implied in simple notions of brand preference. Informants in strong brand relationships felt



NOTE.—Time on X-axis; closeness on Y-axis.

that “something was missing” when they had not used their brands for a while. Strongly held brands were characterized as irreplaceable and unique to the extent that separation anxiety (Berscheid 1983) was anticipated upon withdrawal. Feelings of love ranged from warmth and affection (Perlman and Fehr 1987) to passion (Sternberg 1986), infatuation, and selfish, obsessive dependency (Lane and Wegner 1995). As we recall for Karen and Mary Kay, these strong affective ties often diluted the negative effects of relationship transgressions by encouraging accommodation (Rusbult et al. 1991) and biased attributions of blame (Bradbury and Fincham 1990). Feelings of love also encouraged a biased, positive perception of the partner (Murray, Holmes, and Griffin 1996) that rendered comparisons with alternatives difficult, as we saw with Jean and Pastene whole tomatoes in the can.

*Vicki:* Is loyalty the same as a deep love for something? I don't want to bring the “L” word into things but I guess I really do love a lot of the brands that I use. Opium, Intimate Musk. I can't imagine not having them. I love them, I do.

*Karen:* Oh, I just love Mary Kay! It is the perfect brand

of makeup for me. It really is. When I think of not having it anymore, well, it just makes me nervous.

*Jean:* That (Aussie Miracle), that is MY shampoo. No one touches that. I paid a lot for it. It's mine. I'll let anybody borrow anything usually but that one there is mine.

*Self-connection.* This relationship quality facet reflects the degree to which the brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks, or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of self. Strong brand relationships varied in the type and centrality of the goal connections grounding them, as detailed in the idiographic analyses above. Brand-self connections spanned the temporal horizon as well, ranging from past (nostalgic) to current and future (possible or desired) selves (Kleine et al. 1995). Informant brand stories suggest that strong self-connections support relationship maintenance through the cultivation of protective feelings of uniqueness and dependency (Drigotas and Rusbult 1992) and encouragement of tolerance in the face of adverse circumstance (Lydon and Zanna 1990).

*Interdependence.* Strong brand relationships were also distinguished by a high degree of interdependence

enjoining consumer and brand (Hinde 1995). Interdependence involved frequent brand interactions (e.g., Karen's use of Dove in morning and evening skin care routines), increased scope and diversity of brand-related activities (e.g., Vicki's and Karen's use of Ivory and Mary Kay brand extensions, respectively), and heightened intensity of individual interaction events (e.g., Jean's infrequent but significant sauce-making activities). Consumption rituals emerged as a central process through which interdependence was fostered and celebrated. Interpersonal research suggests that a relationship inextricably woven into the fabric of daily life can endure despite low levels of affective involvement and intimacy (Hinde 1979).

**Commitment.** High levels of commitment (i.e., the intention to behave in a manner supportive of relationship longevity) were also common across strong brand relationships. Informants openly professed emotional commitments (Johnson 1973) through brand pledges: "I am very loyal to that brand"; "I would never buy any other brand besides that." Investment-related commitments (Johnson 1973) were also revealed in the strong brand relationship pool, encouraging intention to continue through structural barriers to exit as opposed to personal dedication: "I could never stop using Coca-Cola; everyone would notice and see that I finally caved in to a weight control problem." Commitment in its various forms fosters stability by implicating the self in relationship outcomes (Vicki: "When you are loyal to a brand, you stick by it. It is like having a backbone") and by encouraging derogation of alternatives in the environment (Johnson and Rusbult 1989; Rosenblatt 1977).

**Intimacy.** Informants' brand stories suggest that elaborate knowledge structures develop around strongly held brands, with richer layers of meaning reflecting deeper levels of intimacy and more durable relationship bonds (Reis and Shaver 1988). At the core, all strong brand relationships were rooted in beliefs about superior product performance. Beliefs in the utilitarian functioning of the brand were sometimes bolstered by performance myths (e.g., Vicki's theories about toothpaste chemistry or Jean's theories on tomato quality control) that marked the brand as superior and irreplaceable and thus resistant to competitive attack. Brand meaning was sometimes further embellished through advertising cues (particularly the association of slogans and brand characters, as with Vicki) or the assignment of personal nicknames (e.g., Vicki refers to her childhood Nestle's Quik brand as "Bunny Yummies"; Baxter 1987). These processes provide consumers with easy tags around which brand information is personalized and stored in memory. A brand relationship memory of personal associations and experiences—a narrative within which the brand plays a central role (Escalas 1996)—develops for strong brands as interaction events accumulate over time. The intimacy afforded through these elaborated meanings feeds a relationship culture (Wood 1982) that supports stability through biased perceptions of the partner (Murray et al.

1996) and his/her sustained saliency over time (Pavia and Costa 1994).

**Brand Partner Quality.** In the marital domain, the perceived caliber of the role enactments of the partner has been linked to overall relationship satisfaction and strength (Burr 1973). The notion of brand partner quality is suggested here as an analogue, one reflecting the consumer's evaluation of the brand's performance in its partnership role. The strong-brand stories suggest five central components of brand partner quality: (1) a felt positive orientation of the brand toward the consumer (e.g., making consumer feel wanted, respected, listened to, and cared for); (2) judgments of the brand's overall dependability, reliability, and predictability in executing its partnership role; (3) judgments of the brand's adherence to the various "rules" composing the implicit relationship contract (Sabatelli and Pearce 1986; Wiseman 1986); (4) trust or faith that the brand will deliver what is desired versus that which is feared; and (5) comfort in the brand's accountability for its actions. Partner quality protects the relationship through the full range of relationship-serving biases noted above (Clark et al. 1994).

*Vicki:* I think a brand should be true to me if I am going to be true to it.

*Karen:* Well, when Mary Kay changed that lipstick color on me, well, I near died. I just never thought they would do that to me!

*Jean:* A brand like that that has been around a long time, you can rely on it and trust it to do what it is supposed to do. Even after 15 years with that fridge, when the generator broke down, they came in and fixed it right away without ever asking a question.

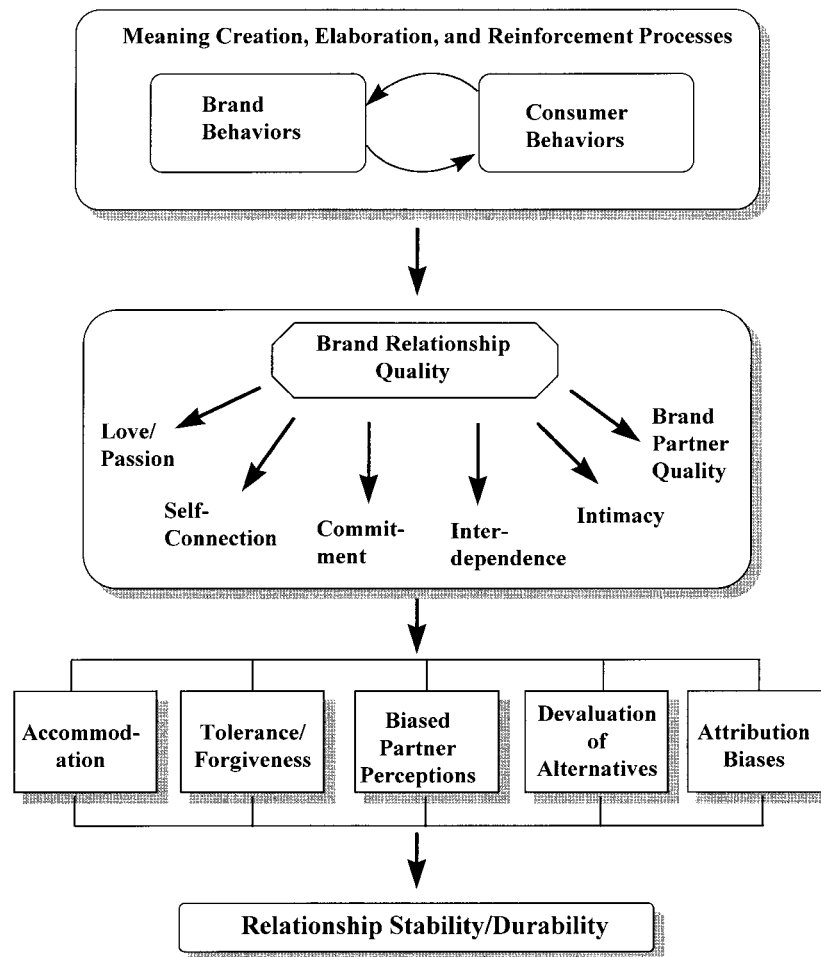
**Summary.** A preliminary model of brand relationship quality is provided in Figure 2. Brand relationship quality evolves through meaningful brand and consumer actions, as per the reciprocity principle on which all relationships are grounded. The nature of this linkage is broadly specified: consumer/brand actions can enhance or dilute BRQ, or dissipate without coincident effects on quality levels per se. The working model assumes a hierarchical construct specification and leaves undefined the particular linkages between (a) consumer or brand actions and BRQ facets, and (b) BRQ facets and intermediate process outcomes.

## DISCUSSION

This study underscores the critical importance of understanding brands and consumers' relationships with them to the advancement of marketing theory. Far from losing their power in the marketplace (Ramsay 1996), brands were shown to serve as powerful repositories of meaning purposively and differentially employed in the substantiation, creation, and (re)production of concepts of self in the marketing age. Although it may seem rather



**FIGURE 2**  
A PRELIMINARY MODEL OF BRAND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND ITS EFFECTS ON RELATIONSHIP STABILITY



contentious to assert that deeply rooted identity concerns are reflected in something as mundane and trivial as everyday brand behaviors, it has been suggested that it is within this level of ordinary experience that the meanings most central to life are contained (Bourdieu 1984; Fiske 1992; Tennen, Suls, and Affleck 1991). Immersion in the complex world of ordinary brand consumption experiences will help us develop "more generalized, analytical, but also informed theories" of marketing and consumer behavior (Miller 1995, p. 53).

A critical insight emerging from this analysis concerns the holistic character of consumer-brand relationship phenomena and, by extension, the perspective that is required for their study. The data submit the important point that deep knowledge of the consumer-brand relationship is obtained only through consideration of the larger whole in which that relationship is embedded. As has been argued in other consumer behavior contexts (Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson 1996), this study makes a strong case

for understanding the broader context of people's life experiences as a basis for anticipating the constellation of brands with which relationships are likely to develop. As the data so vividly illustrate, consumer-brand relationships are more a matter of perceived goal compatibility than congruence between discreet product attributes and personality trait images. Meaningful relationships are qualified not along symbolic versus functional product category lines, or in terms of high versus low involvement classes, but by the perceived ego significance of the chosen brands. Another overarching point on the holistic character of consumer-brand relationships emerges: individual consumer-brand relationships make the most sense when considered at the aggregate level of the personal brandscape. Just as the meaning of a given construct is dependent on its relationships with other constructs (Hirschfeld and Gelman 1994; Kosslyn and Koenig 1992), so too is the meaning of a given brand relationship a function of other relationships in the portfolio. The

preceding analysis clearly shows that thematic connections operate not just across brands within a category, or within role-related product constellations assembled for the expression of social lifestyles (Solomon and Assael 1988), but across the entire collectivity of disparate brands and categories marshaled in pursuit of a full range of goal-related tasks. Brands cohere into systems that consumers create not only to aid in living but also to give meaning to their lives. Put simply, consumers do not choose *brands*, they choose *lives*.

These holistic qualities go unnoticed in traditional brand usage studies (cf. Sirgy 1982) that focus on fractionated concepts of self (e.g., the ideal vs. real self), managerially defined product classes (e.g., laundry detergents), and specific mechanisms of relational association (e.g., brand-image congruence). By not fully developing the individual elements of the brand-self relationship equation, we have accumulated an incomplete picture of the dynamics underlying important forms of symbolic consumption behavior. An analysis with the operative goal of identifying shared variance across products and brands within the context of particular life experiences does more to reveal the dynamics of brand choice and consumption than one focused on shared perceptions of brand differences within a category domain.

The data reported herein also add to the growing body of evidence on the active role of the consumer in the production of modern culture (Holt 1995; Mick and Fournier 1998; Miller 1995). What matters in the construction of brand relationships is not simply what managers intend for them, or what brand images “contain” in the culture (McCracken 1986; Solomon 1983), but what consumers do with brands to add meaning in their lives. The abstracted, goal-derived, and experiential categories that consumers create for brands are not necessarily the same as the categories imposed by the marketers in charge of brand management. Consumer-relevant relationship themes cut across the artificial boundaries of brands and products to reveal purposive constructs employed in making sense of one’s daily life (e.g., things I do to reward myself for surviving a tough day; “florals” that make me feel attractive and romantic). That one brand often fits multiple thematic categories for the same or different consumers reveals the fluid and polysemous nature of goal-derived brand categories. This reality—that consumers’ experiences with brands are often phenomenologically distinct from those assumed by the managers who tend them—commands a different conception of brand at the level of lived experience, and new, more complex approaches to the social classification of branded goods.

To the extent that the relationship themes revealed in this study reflect a culturally entrenched gender ideology toward brands, researchers may be well advised to attend to women’s brand relationships for the insights into contemporary consumer culture they reveal (Bristor and Fischer 1993). Theoretical accounts of the gendered self (Chodorow 1978; Crosby 1991) emphasize how feminine

identity is structured and sustained by themes of connectedness and relationality. This study argues for the power and influence of the relationship theme beyond the interpersonal domain to the world of branded goods. Since women in relationships feel empowered, they emerge as key agents of social change through their dealings in the ordinary world of brand consumption. This agency is forcefully expressed through the ability to transform brand commodities into symbolic markers of cultural categories (Applbaum and Jordt 1996; Olsen 1995). To ignore this class of consumers, or their relational dealings in the world of branded consumption, is to ignore a vanguard of the marketing age (Miller 1995).

## Implications and Future Directions

In valuing the present theory-building exercise (Peter and Olson 1983), we consider insights offered through application of inducted concepts to two relevant disciplinary domains: brand loyalty and brand personality.

*Brand Loyalty Theory and Research.* The present analysis suggests an alternative to the construct of brand loyalty in the notion of brand relationship quality. Brand relationship quality is similar in spirit to brand loyalty: both constructs attempt to capture the strength of the connection formed between the consumer and the brand toward a prediction of relationship stability over time. Brand relationship quality, however, offers conceptual richness over extant loyalty notions that should prove capable of stimulating theory, research, and practice in valuable and meaningful ways. Six facets are specified, each with a rich theoretical tradition in the interpersonal domain upon which conceptual and measurement ideas can be built. It is important to note that several BRQ facets stipulate affective components left highly underspecified in traditional loyalty conceptions (e.g., love, passion, and self-attachment). Strength properties of the attitudinal connection between consumer and brand are also more clearly delineated within the BRQ frame (Raden 1985). Love, for example, captures strength as defined by degree of affect associated with the brand attitude; self-connection taps strength in terms of centrality; personal commitment captures strength as attitudinal stability. Finally, BRQ offers comparative advantage in the domain of process specification. Given theoretical ties to brand and consumer actions, the framework offers guidance as to the sources through which strong brand bonds are created and the processes through which stability is or is not maintained over time. These are topics on which theories of brand loyalty have been relatively silent. The qualities mentioned here lend the actionability and diagnosticity critical to a framework with such obvious managerial significance as this (Shocker, Srivastava, and Ruekert 1994).

The present research does more than help clarify the concept of relationship strength implied in the notion of brand loyalty, however: it puts the idea of the brand loyal

relationship itself into proper perspective. This investigation forces mindful recognition and appreciation of a teeming field of relationship alternatives in the consumer-brand domain. This diversity in relationship forms reveals the discipline's focus on positively held, voluntarily engaged, long-term, and affectively intense relationships—brand loyal relations as per Jacoby and Chestnut (1978)—as unnecessarily restrictive and inherently limiting. It is estimated that Americans foster over 100 informal personal relationships but only 20 or so with significant intimacy and routine contact (Milardo 1992). These “weak ties” are more than pale imitations of “strong ties.” They are relationship ties important in their own right, if not for the simple fact that there are so many of them. In a materialistic consumer culture in which marketers are driven to initiate one-to-one relationships with each prospect they encounter, we need to expand our attention beyond those few brand relationships that will emerge as “close” and “committed.” If we extrapolate from the findings suggested here, brand relationships will likely exhibit qualitative differences in process and content that are so strong as to render class-insensitive analyses that are at the least uninformative and perhaps even misleading. Research dedicated to an exposition of the alternate relationship forms uncovered here, particularly in terms of the rules and expectations implied in their contracts, and the dynamic processes through which these are managed over time, would advance theory along needed lines.

In moving forward with this goal, specification of level of analysis will prove a task not without its difficulties. The present study reveals the inextricable character of brand and category meanings, suggesting that once a significant relationship is established, the meaning of the brand becomes inseparable from the value of the product class per se. Whether relationships are manifest at the level of the brand or the product class is a complicated issue requiring precise insight into processes of meaning transfer across these two domains (McCracken 1986). A related question concerns the actuality of the brand relationship: that is, to what degree is the relationship manifest in concrete encounters between partners known personally to each other (Hinde 1979). Future research must take note of these issues and develop rules for their consideration in the brand domain.

*Brand Personality Theory and Research.* A new theoretical conception of brand personality is implied in a framework that recognizes reciprocal exchange between active and interdependent relationship partners. Specifically, brand personality can be thought of as a set of trait inferences constructed by the consumer based on repeated observation of behaviors enacted by the brand at the hand of its manager, that cohere into a role perception of the brand as partner in the relationship dyad. This conceptualization offers several theoretical and practical advantages over traditional views. Consideration of only those trait inferences stimulated by actual brand behaviors

alleviates concern regarding the ad hoc, shotgun nature of most personality formulations (Kassarjian 1971). A focus on the “doing side of personality” (Buss and Craik 1983) also provides much-needed insight into the processes through which brand personality is created, developed, and changed over time. This perspective forces a more scrupulous look at how marketing decisions collectively shape the personalities of brands over time, thus enabling an important and sought-after link between managerial action and consumer response (Biel 1992). The trait inferences most commonly drawn from standard marketing actions can be chronicled through experimental research, yielding a template against which marketing decisions can be proactively considered for their developmental or reparative effects on the personality of a brand. Summarizing brand personalities in terms of relationship role perceptions shared across consumer audiences (e.g., Saturn as best friend, Microsoft as the master in a master/slave relationship), and plotting those perceptions in the relationship space articulated earlier, affords a framework for brand image management (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986) that may prove both rich in its insight and relevant in its strategic application.

## CONCLUSION

This research was executed in the true spirit of discovery (Wells 1993), its intent one of stimulating novel and rich ideas concerning the important yet underconceptualized marketing phenomenon of the consumer-brand relationship. The findings establish the relevancy of the brand relationship theory-building goal and provide preliminary frameworks for the execution, refinement, and extension of this task. The research has implications for those interested in relationships outside the consumer-brand domain, both within the marketing discipline and beyond. Ultimately, metaphors must be judged by the depth and breadth of the thoughts they spark (Wicker 1985; Zaltman 1995). By these criteria, applications of the relationship notion emerge triumphant.

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